

Harry Potter and the Lack of Lamb Sauce

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Harry Potter and the Lack of Lamb Sauce

by [imagitory](#)

Summary

Inspired by a post on Tumblr, this is a AU story set during Harry's sixth year at Hogwarts,

with one big, foul-mouthed difference. Instead of Horace Slughorn, the position of Potions professor will be taken on by...Gordon Ramsay.

Notes

Hi there! I originally posted these drabbles on Tumblr and...yeah, the response was sort of mind-blowing, so I thought I would post them here, as well as put any updates here! I sincerely hope you enjoy them...I was surprised by how much fun they were to write, and I hope to write more in the future! xoxo

Disclaimer: *The "Gordon Ramsay" depicted in this story is an AU version of his TV personality, shaped to fit within the Harry Potter universe. Therefore a lot of his background and personality is, as one could expect, fictionalized heavily, even if there are parallels to the real man and his RL history. Still, he will still fit within the confines and limitations of the HP universe, so you shouldn't expect that Ramsay will suddenly swoop in on the back of a giant eagle and take out Voldemort singlehandedly with his fire breath. But yes, I do not know the man personally, so it is impossible to make him a three-dimensional character without taking some liberties. Given that I'm not usually one to write Real-Person fiction, I wanted to at least make it clear that this is Gordon Ramsay the character, not Gordon Ramsay the person. ;)*

Hell's Kitchen

Harry took Dumbledore's arm, and in a flash of contorting limbs and frenetic sounds and colors, they had left Privet Drive and appeared on another street corner.

This street looked nothing like the Dursleys' pristine, conservative neighborhood. From the look of it, Harry would guess this was an exclusively *wizarding* neighborhood, judging by the off-kilter angles of the houses, the flocks of owls, the local apothecaries and robe shops, and the roads that resembled and rippled just like murky green lake water.

Harry followed the Hogwarts Headmaster as he started off up the street, glancing at him with a questioning eye. Dumbledore smiled wryly.

"Welcome to Wandsworth Green, Harry," he said serenely. "This entire community sits on top of a small lake in the Muggle neighborhood of Wandsworth Common and is hidden by very powerful Concealment spells. Normally one can only enter it by stepping onto a certain pattern of planks on the bridge that goes over part of the lake...but I thought that Apparition would be more efficient, given the circumstances..."

Harry frowned. "Circumstances, sir?"

Dumbledore led him past the apothecary and toward the end of the street.

"We are here to try to recruit our newest professor. I anticipate, however, that he might be a bit reluctant...ah, here we are."

They had approached a restaurant. At first Harry was alarmed at the sight of it, for it looked like it was on fire, but after a second he realized there was no danger – the ceiling was simply decorated with constantly raging, but perfectly contained magical flames, as well as a header in red neon lights.

HELL'S KITCHEN

"Gordon always did have an inherent flair for the dramatic," Dumbledore commented serenely upon noticing Harry's quirked eyebrow.

The two pushed open the door, to find an empty dining room. Harry could see on the door that dinner hours had ended not too long ago.

Just inside was a young man a little older than Harry with a large nose busily wiping tables with a magic rag that moved over the wood and back into the man's hand by itself. He looked up, immediately putting on a "customer service" mask that made it clear he'd said this exact thing a million times.

"Excuse me, but the restaurant is closed –"

He stopped abruptly, however, when he recognized the people who had entered the restaurant.

"...Pr-Professor Dumbledore!"

"Good evening, Beau," Dumbledore greeted pleasantly. "You're looking well. I presume Gordon is just helping with kitchen clean-up?"

“Ah...yes, Professor,” said Beau anxiously. He shot a glance at Harry – he looked incredibly uncomfortable and he kept licking his lips. “Shall I...go fetch him, for you...?”

“If you would,” Dumbledore said indulgently.

The man called Beau gave a weak little nod; then, glancing over his shoulder and back at Harry again, he bustled off toward the kitchen.

Harry looked at Dumbledore confusedly. He knew the Defense Against the Dark Arts job was always very hard to fill, but from the sound of things, this teacher Dumbledore was seeking out was a cook in some restaurant. It wasn't like Harry underestimated him because of this, but all of the other professors – excluding particularly bizarre oddities like Umbridge – usually had a background teaching about or fighting against the Dark Arts. Even Lockhart had had a (misleading) reputation of being talented in fighting Dark creatures.

A raised voice came from the kitchen, but Harry couldn't quite make it out. A moment later, a tall man with a square face, blond hair, and very sharp blue eyes came stomping through the door of the kitchen. He wore a white chef's uniform with the sleeves rolled up and still had a large kitchen knife in one of his strong fists.

“Dumbledore,” the chef said coldly. “So you *did* choose to show your monkey's arse of a face here.”

“As always, Gordon, your language is delightfully colorful,” Dumbledore replied, clearly not offended at all.

“Don't bullshit me,” the man called Gordon swore angrily. “If you've come to try to recruit me, you've got another thing coming. I frankly don't know how you've kept the loyalty of *half* the people who work for you, with your fucked-up attitude toward human life! Now pick up your feet and get out of my restaurant, you blasted numpty – ”

He stopped abruptly, however, at the sight of Harry just behind Dumbledore.

“Harry...may I introduce Gordon Ramsay,” Dumbledore said calmly. “Gordon, I believe you're already familiar with Harry Potter?”

Harry's face had been scrunched up in shock and righteous anger, but his temper cooled when Dumbledore spoke. Ramsay's expression likewise seemed to clear at the sight of Harry – there was something almost guilty in his face.

“...Yes,” he said lowly. “How do you do?”

He extended a hand to Harry, who took it out of obligation but refused to shake it. Ramsay's mouthing off to Dumbledore had left a sour taste in his mouth.

“Hello,” he said stiffly.

Ramsay offered a faintly wry smile. “I must apologize for my language – although I daresay you know it all by now, I try not to swear...my hand unfortunately just gets forced by certain individuals.”

He shot a cold look at Dumbledore.

“How long is that list of individuals, Gordon?” the headmaster asked lightly with a twinkle in his eye. “Forgive my vanity, but I would much prefer to be among the elite in such a category.”

Ramsay shot him a bewildered, disgusted look. “Vanity I can forgive. It’s everything else I can’t stand.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “As I feared...you’re still as stubborn as ever. Very well, Gordon – I concede. May I use your facilities, before we go?”

Ramsay crossed his arms, still holding the knife in his fist, and glared at Dumbledore suspiciously, but curtly inclined his head in a single nod toward the restroom in the back of the dining hall.

“Thank you,” said Dumbledore, and with a swish of his lilac robes, he turned and disappeared through the red restroom door.

There was a short, palpable silence between Ramsay and Harry for a moment. Then Ramsay unfolded his arms and faced Harry with a more pleasant expression.

“...Are you hungry?”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“Are you hungry?” Ramsay repeated patiently. “We have some food leftover from our meals today – Beef Wellington, Pumpkin Soup, Chicken Cordon Bleu with braised potatoes – I usually have my servers take it all home after work for dinner, so that we don’t waste anything.”

“Oh no – I’m fine,” Harry dissented firmly. Unfortunately his stomach rumbled loudly just as he said it.

Ramsay smiled.

“Well, at the very least, I’ve got to let you taste my Mint Chocolate Truffles. They’re my specialty.”

He pulled out a chair for Harry, before settling down in another chair on the other side of the table. With a wave of his hand, his knife dissolved away into an unusually thick and long silver-tipped wand, and Ramsay waved it at the kitchen door. In an instant, a small plate came floating out of the kitchen and landed delicately on the table in front of Harry’s chair. There were five small chocolate balls arranged neatly on the plate.

“Go on, try one,” Ramsay said gently.

Still feeling reluctant, Harry slowly settled down in the chair and took one of the chocolate truffles from the plate.

“Thank you,” he mumbled.

He popped it into his mouth. All at once it felt like his taste buds were swirling in a sea of creamy chocolate and cool, refreshing mint. It was delicious!

The happy surprise must have shown on Harry’s face, for Ramsay smiled more widely.

“You like it?”

“Yeah!” said Harry. “It’s really good.”

“Well, thank you,” Ramsay replied. “I hoped you would.”

He picked up one of the truffles himself, turning it over in his hand as he studied it carefully.

“...When your parents got married, I sent them a whole box of these,” Ramsay said absently.

Harry was startled. “You knew my mum and dad?”

Ramsay put the truffle down with a sad smile. “Yes...they were both quite a bit older than me, and I was too young to join the Order during the War, but I played Quidditch against James for a year at Hogwarts. And I knew Lily through Professor Slughorn’s old ‘*Slug Club*’ – he was Head of Slytherin house and Potions Professor back then. Old codger loved to ‘*collect*’ children that he could mentor and then receive favors from once they were successful...a pleasant enough chap, I suppose, but a bit materialistic for my taste.”

Harry frowned. “Well, if he was a Slytherin, I guess that’s not surprising.”

“Easy now,” Ramsay reproached gently. His tone was much less sharp – honestly, since he’d started talking to Harry, Ramsay’s tone had gained a wonderful down-to-earth, patient quality that reminded Harry of Lupin. “Don’t give into that silly old Gryffindor notion that all Slytherins are rotten. Every Slytherin, like every other student, is like a fresh tomato...full of potential, but also ripe for spoilage and bruising. That’s why we must treat them gently – keep them well-washed, partner them with others, and transform them into something amazing.”

Harry considered Ramsay carefully. “You sure didn’t treat Professor Dumbledore very gently.”

Ramsay turned a bit more solemn. “The Headmaster isn’t a student – he’s a professor and a fully trained wizard with a lot of influence. Yet he makes it a point to hire many substandard teachers – not Minerva, Filius, or Pomona, clearly, but they deserve *better* than the partners they’ve been forced to contend with. Dolores Umbridge? A perfect *monster* of a woman! She should be down at the bottom of a well, not in a classroom with children! Gilderoy Lockhart? I knew him at Hogwarts! That dim-bulb trollop is so pathetic I daresay a *Cornish pixie* is braver!”

Harry snorted, remembering Lockhart’s “eventful” first class where, indeed, Lockhart was taken down by a swarm of pixies.

“And that’s not even *touching* Severus Snape,” growled Ramsay. “How Dumbledore found it in his heart to hire him, I’ll never know...”

Harry had to nod in agreement. “I don’t know why he hired him either. I know Snape was a Death Eater, and Professor Dumbledore said he turned spy for the Order before the War was over...but I still don’t trust him.”

Ramsay raised his eyebrows. “And why is that?”

Harry didn’t know where to start. Snape’s bullying of him and his friends – his loathing of Gryffindor house overall – his blatant favoritism of Malfoy – his shady behavior – it was something that felt like it’d take forever to explain.

“It’s complicated,” Harry said at last.

“Mm.”

Ramsay looked like he was thinking.

“...Do you like Potions, Harry?”

The question was abrupt.

“Not really,” answered Harry. “I mean, it’s kind of hard to like it when you’ve got Snape breathing down your neck while you work, taking points from Gryffindor for no reason and putting up all the Slytherins on a pedestal...”

This seemed to get Ramsay’s attention.

“He does that?” he asked, sounding both dismayed and sympathetic. The tone encouraged Harry to go on.

“Yeah...you should see how he treats us. If anyone gets one little thing wrong, he uses it to shame them and sometimes the whole class. Like one time, he was picking on Neville Longbottom – he’s a friend of mine, in Gryffindor – for his Shrinking Solution being wrong, and Snape decided he was going to feed Neville’s potion to his toad Trevor at the end of class to see if it would work.”

Ramsay looked outraged. “*See if it would work?* Shrinking Solution can be deathly *poisonous* if brewed incorrectly! To threaten to poison a student’s pet, when you’re supposed to be *teaching* him – unbelievable!”

Harry continued – he felt vindicated in a way he hadn’t felt in a long while, hearing Ramsay’s reaction.

“He picks on Gryffindors mostly, but he bullies Neville a lot. He doesn’t like me very much, because of my dad...so he doesn’t like my friends much either. There was this one time, my friend Hermione – she’s the brightest girl in our year – was trying to answer one of his questions, and Snape snapped at her that she was an insufferable know-it-all and made her cry.”

Ramsay looked disgusted. He’d brought his hands up to his face, covering his eyes and massaging his temples. “Good God..”

The door to the restroom abruptly opened. Harry jumped, startled, as Dumbledore strode back over to them.

“Ah, much better,” the Headmaster said smoothly. “Well, Harry, I suppose we’ve taken too much advantage of Gordon’s hospitality – time for us to move on.”

Harry immediately got to his feet. Ramsay stood as well, his face abruptly turning much harder as he faced Dumbledore again.

“Dumbledore,” he growled. “If you want me for the position, then I expect to be able to do things *my way*.”

Harry gaped. After all that, he was going to take the Dark Arts job?

“But of course,” Dumbledore replied pleasantly.

“And I expect that you’ll keep your stupid, broken nose out of my business while I fix the mess *you’ve* seen fit to make!” Ramsay added, his voice rising, and he got right up in Dumbledore’s face.

“Duly noted.”

Dumbledore helped himself to one of Ramsay’s truffles with a smile.

“I look forward to seeing you when term starts, Professor Ramsay.”

With this, Harry and Dumbledore left the restaurant.

“Professor?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“I don’t understand,” Harry said slowly. “The entire time we were here, Ramsay acted like he *hated* you. And then, after I told him about Snape and his classes, he decided to take the job! Why?”

“Gordon has an incredibly strong moral compass,” Dumbledore answered simply. “It’s a trait that makes me wonder if he could’ve been an excellent Gryffindor, at school...though of course Gordon has said he’s very content as a Hufflepuff and colorfully told me where I may put my thoughts regarding his Sorting. Regardless, if there’s one thing that can convince Gordon to take on a project, it’s incompetence on someone else’s part.”

Harry blinked. “Wait, so...he took the job because I told him Snape was a bad teacher?”

“And he knows he can be a better one,” Dumbledore confirmed with a nod, his blue eyes twinkling. “Although your method is not *exactly* one I’d encourage, I had a feeling that you and Gordon might find enough common ground that your presence might be enough to sway him.”

Once they had walked a good couple of feet from Hell’s Kitchen, Dumbledore extended his arm again.

“Come, Harry. The night awaits.”

Still feeling faintly bewildered, Harry nonetheless took hold of Dumbledore’s arm and the two disappeared once more.

Professor Ramsay

Dumbledore's announcement of Ramsay taking over Potions while Snape took on Defense Against the Dark Arts was met with a lot of buzz from the student body. Snape had been incredibly smug about finally receiving the job he'd wanted for such a long time, and most of the Slytherins were rather thrilled about their Head of House's success too. But the other half of the announcement – the part about Ramsay – also perked everyone's interest. It seemed that Gordon Ramsay had a bit of a reputation in the Wizarding World.

"He's known for his cookbooks, mainly," Ron explained to Harry one evening at dinner. "But apparently he was this prodigy at Hogwarts, becoming Hufflepuff Quidditch Captain at 14 and creating new potions while he was still at school. But then he got badly injured, and he decided to open up a restaurant instead. Mum's been dreaming of getting a reservation there for ages, but it's just so upscale..."

"I wonder why he would just throw away all of his *potential* like that," Hermione said with a disapproving frown. "I mean – imagine all the good you could do for the world, if you're that good at potions!"

"He *does* do a lot of good," Ron dissented. "Sure, he's not exactly *academic*, but he's perfectly brilliant! He helps out restaurants that are about to go out of business, even if they're Muggle places. Dad says he exclusively hires and trains Squibs and Muggle relatives of witches and wizards to work in his restaurant, so that they can have stable employment in the Wizarding World even if they can't use magic."

"That's awesome," said Harry, impressed despite himself.

"Yeah!" said Ron. "Only, he's also known for being kind of scary. His temper is *legendary* – like, if you make a mistake, he can just go off on you. One time he visited this new restaurant that opened up in Diagon Alley a long while back, and he caused a big fuss in the dining room when he demanded to see the chef and roared for everyone to hear about how the lamb was dryer than the crack of the guy's arse."

Hermione gaped, clearly disgusted. "That's...that's utterly *boorish*!"

"I can see it," said Harry, grinning despite himself. "When I met Ramsay, he called Dumbledore a '*blasted numpty*.'"

Harry at first had thought that Hermione would just have to tell Ron and him how Ramsay's classes were, since neither of them had gotten the "O" they would've needed to continue...but Professor McGonagall came to find them later that morning, informing them that Ramsay was comfortable accepting high E's into his class, and so Ron and Harry would both be added to the roster.

When Ron and Harry entered the dungeon where Potions was normally held that day, they were surprised to find the room had been utterly transformed. The classroom – which, for as long as they could remember, had always been dank, dark, and damp with poor greenish lighting and grotesque trinkets lined up on the bookcases – was now clean and well-lit. Ramsay had redecorated the walls with many different-colored potion bottles as well as various ingredients that had to have come fresh from the Hogwarts Greenhouses, including several potted Mandrakes and glass jars full of Shrivelfigs. There were also four clean bronze cauldrons set up in the aisles between the students' desks.

At the front of the classroom, sitting behind a much cleaner cherrywood desk that had replaced Snape's, was Ramsay, dressed in high-collared robes just as perfectly white as his chef's uniform back at Hell's Kitchen. His silver-tipped wand sat comfortably in a belt loop in the waist of his robes and his sleeves were once again rolled up as if he was ready to get to work.

"Good morning, everyone," he greeted with a broad smile.

The students all mumbled various incarnations of "*hello*" and "*good morning*." Ramsay got up, propping himself up with his hands on the desk as he looked around at the class.

"All right, first of all," he said in a more business-like tone, "when I greet you or ask you something, I expect a proper response. You will address me as '*Professor*,' and I would like to hear *words* and not *mumbles*. So let's try that again. Good morning!"

"Good morning, Professor," the class replied a little uncomfortably.

"Better," Ramsay granted mildly. "Could do with some improvement...but I suppose that's what the school year is for."

He came around to stand in front of his desk, clapping his hands together in satisfaction.

"Now then...welcome to Potions! You are now all officially N.E.W.T. students. I know that must feel like an accomplishment. The O.W.L. exams are easily the most stressful ones you'll ever have to take, so now that you've overcome that hurdle, you know that you are capable enough in Potions to function in the Wizarding World. Unfortunately if you want to be *more* than just capable – if you want to pursue a career that requires Potions, like one in the Ministry or at St. Mungo's – you're only just getting started. You'll be putting in a *lot* of work this year...but the fun part about N.E.W.T.-level Potions is that, unlike your previous classes, we will not be using our textbook very much. Textbooks, in the end, are crutches for real hard work. This year we'll be learning about the *intuition* that comes with Potion-making. Now you can start learning about the *subtleties* of the ingredients – which ones mix well and which ones don't – and developing your own instincts so as to *improve* your work rather than just blindly follow instructions."

The class's focus remained solidly on Ramsay as he talked, devoting nothing but rapt attention to him. Hermione suddenly looked a little nervous – she was a good student largely because of her photographic memory and her meticulous observance of the school textbooks. Telling Hermione to take cues from something *other* than a book would be like telling Snape to wash his greasy hair.

"I have three Potions I want to share with you today," said Ramsay. "We'll be studying each of them in depth over the course of the term."

He withdrew his wand from the belt of his robes and pointed it at the leftmost cauldron, which looked like it was filled with simple tap water. In an instant, it floated along the aisles so that everyone could see and smell it.

"Can anyone tell me what potion this is?" Ramsay asked.

Hermione's hand immediately shot into the air.

"Your name, my dear?" said Ramsay.

"Hermione Granger, sir."

Ramsay's eyes flickered very briefly to Harry; he then nodded politely at Hermione. "Very nice to meet you. And the potion is called?"

“Veritaserum,” Hermione answered at once, very quickly. “I could tell because of its clear consistency and its lack of odor, making it virtually undetectable – ”

“ – when placed in food and drink,” Ramsay finished for her, smiling wryly. “Very good, darling – five points to Gryffindor. Yes, as Hermione said, this is Truth Potion. Not infallible, of course – there are ways to combat it, should you find yourself drugged with it – but still an excellent way to force the truth out of people.”

He lowered his wand, gently floating the cauldron with Veritaserum back to where it had been. He then turned to the next cauldron, levitating it around the room; this one was full of a bubbling, mud-like mixture that Harry recognized at once, but Hermione’s hand was already in the air, so he stayed quiet.

“Yes, Hermione?” said Ramsay, his eyebrows raised. “Would you like to tell us which one this is?”

“Polyjuice Potion, sir,” Hermione replied promptly. “It helps a witch or wizard take on the form of another.”

“Excellent – take five more points for Gryffindor. Polyjuice Potion must be individually brewed, for it to work properly – it doesn’t keep very well long-term, and you must also have some sort of material from whomever you’d like to impersonate, like a hair or a toenail. Perfectly *ghastly* stuff...”

With another casual flick of his wand, Ramsay lowered the cauldron back down and turned to the third. This one, which was filled with a shiny, whitish potion, let off wonderful, fragrant fumes as it floated down the aisles. Harry distinctly picked out the scents of treacle tart, the fresh wood of a new broomstick handle, and something flowery he thought he might have smelled at the Burrow.

Hermione’s hand once again punched the air, and Ramsay actually laughed.

“All right, darling, tell us what it is.”

Hermione blushed a little, smiling shyly. “Amortentia – it’s the most powerful Love Potion in the world!”

All the girls in the classroom visibly straightened up, looking over the potion with renewed interest.

“Five points,” Gordon said casually. “Though honestly, calling Amortentia or any other variation a ‘*Love Potion*’ is something of a misnomer – no magic can perfectly recreate love. It’s more of an ‘*Infatuation Potion*’ – illogical, high-energy, and *very* powerful. But be warned if you’re considering brewing one of these...even when brewed correctly, they cause a lot more problems than they solve, I can assure you of that.”

He turned to face the class more fully, waving his wand at the board so that it flipped over, revealing the organized instructions written on it. Along the top were the words “*Draught of the Living Death*.” Before Ramsay could speak again, however, a Slytherin girl with her hair braided around her head like a crown sitting in the back raised her hand.

“Your name, please, darling?” said Ramsay.

“Daphne Greengrass, Professor,” the girl replied curtly. “You didn’t tell us about *that* potion.”

She pointed at the fourth and smallest cauldron. Ramsay smiled widely.

“I most certainly did not – five points to Slytherin for reminding me. This one is a little special, if I do say so myself...”

He levitated the cauldron with his wand, floating it over toward Hermione’s desk. The liquid frothed bronze with streaks of gold and silver, swirling around in the pewter basin as if there were little goldfish swimming in spirals just under the surface.

“Do you recognize it, Hermione?” Ramsay asked amusedly.

Hermione, for once, looked lost for words. Looking perfectly ashamed, she shook her head.

“Oh, now, love, don’t wilt on me,” Ramsay said gently. “I’m sure even a fully trained witch would have some difficulty with this one...there’s no need to be disappointed.”

He turned to the rest of the class. “This is my own variation of an incredibly rare and complex potion that you can find in the very back of your textbook. The original brew has much more of a *golden* color – I merely warmed the ashwinder eggs over a fire before adding them, counteracted the rue with a sprig of peppermint, and added a good clockwise turn of the cauldron after stirring to help the ingredients set, so as to make the potion’s effects last longer and reduce any potentially uncomfortable side effects.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up and she quickly raised her hand, almost bouncing in her seat with excitement.

“Did you figure it out, Hermione?” asked Ramsay.

“It’s Felix Felicis!” she answered eagerly. “Liquid luck!”

The entire class straightened up at once, immediately interested. Even Draco Malfoy, who had been notably quiet and disinterested during the entire class, seemed to gain a little more light in his gray eyes.

“Very good,” Ramsay said with a broad smile. “Ten points to Gryffindor. Felix Felicis is a potion that is *highly* regulated – it’s illegal to use them for any sort of competition or game, and even using it too much in a single lifetime can lead to dangerous overconfidence and even madness. But in small doses, it can give you some of the best luck you’ll ever have in your life. I’ve only had it once myself, on my birthday – and by the end of it, I met the woman who is now my fiancée. So yes, pretty nice all around.”

The small cauldron finally floated back down to the ground, and Ramsay casually placed a hand on the rim, his face growing a little more serious.

“We won’t be brewing Felix Felicis this year, as even fully trained potion masters have immense difficulty with it...but I brewed this for you for two reasons. One: I wanted to demonstrate for you how you can take a potion and safely modify it – you can do this with anything as simple as a Boil-Curing Potion or as complicated as this, as long as you do it carefully and after putting in the proper amount of study and thought. Two: I wanted to give you something to work for in this lesson. Today we’ll be working on the Draught of the Living Death, which is a rather tricky potion. I want you to use this recipe and your own intuition to try to brew your own Draught. The Draught is only dangerous when it is brewed correctly, so it’ll be very hard for you to cause much damage if you make a mistake. The best attempt tonight will receive a tiny vial of Felix Felicis, good for 24 hours of good luck. We will then also do this exact same test again at the end of the year, and another tiny vial will be given to the student whose potion has improved the most. You will have one hour to finish your potion. Your time starts...now.”

By the end of the class, Harry had won the Felix Felicis, with a little help from the old, battered textbook he'd found in the cabinet. He had felt a bit guilty seeing how upset Hermione was about her own lackluster potion and having lost the challenge, but he had to admit, it had felt *so* good when Ramsay beamed proudly at him and offhandedly mentioned that his mother had been awfully good at Potions too. It was a *little* underhanded...but for the first time in his life, Harry actually did well at Potions! That brightened his mood enough that he could overlook the rest...at least for right now.

The Confrontation

Within a few weeks, Potions had quickly become many students' favorite subject. Professor Ramsay, despite his very high standards, was always there to offer a helping hand if someone was having trouble with their work. He'd shown none of his infamous temper to his students, even when he was severely tested. There was a story circulating in late September about a Muggle-born first year who had accidentally spilled his incomplete, boiling hot potion on Ramsay's foot, but instead of going off on the boy, Ramsay simply helped the boy clean up the mess and hobbled back to his desk on one foot without raising his voice in the slightest.

"I heard he didn't even go to Madame Pomfrey afterwards!" Harry heard one first year squeak when she was recounting the story for her friends at the Gryffindor table. "Once class was over, he just hobbled around his office on one foot making his own healing potion. Said he liked washing down those sorts of potions with a good cup of hot chocolate, rather than just taking it out of a bottle."

It wasn't until early October that everyone really got to see Ramsay's temper in action. It all started when Ramsay was heading down to the Hogwarts greenhouses – he had intended to ask Professor Sprout about the condition of her Moonseed and Belladonna plants, for he thought having those materials fresh in two of his upcoming classes would be helpful.

When he arrived at the greenhouse, however, he found that he was early, for neither Professor Sprout nor her class had arrived yet. There was only one person there: a young man of about sixteen with a chubby, round face, who was tending to a gnarled stump-like plant. Ramsay was very quiet in his approach, since he didn't want to startle the boy as he delicately extracted a pulsating green pod from inside the plant.

"I'm impressed," Ramsay said at last, once the boy had withdrawn his hand.

The boy jumped. When he turned around, his face went very white.

"...P-Professor Ramsay!"

"I don't usually see students that confident around a Snargaluff plant," Ramsay said with a small smile. "Terribly venomous little buggers – I've always needed an extra set of hands whenever I've worked with one."

Ramsay sat down on the bench next to the boy, who was as stiff as a board.

"Here – would it help if I held the pot while you extract those? I seem to recall they like to be rocked."

The boy, still seeming very nervous, nonetheless gave a weak little nod. Ramsay picked up the plant, bringing it into his lap and rocking it very slowly back and forth as if it were an infant, and after a minute the boy went back to slowly extracting the pods.

"What's your name, young man?" asked Ramsay.

"Neville Longbottom," he replied lowly.

A gleam of recognition flickered through Ramsay's eyes.

"...Nice to meet you."

There was something odd in his voice, something bubbling under the surface – was it pity? Was it sadness? Neville wasn't really sure. But whatever it was, Ramsay quickly forced it from his tone when he spoke again.

“So Neville, you're in sixth year, then?”

“Yes, sir,” Neville answered.

“Amazing,” Ramsay said admiringly. “If I'd been so good at handling a dangerous plant like this at sixteen, I daresay I would be a Herbology professor today.”

Neville flushed a dark red.

“Th-thank you, sir,” he said, pleasantly surprised by the compliment.

“It's a shame I don't have you in my class,” Ramsay said lightly. “I would love to see what you could do in Potions, with your talent for Herbology.”

Neville's smile slid off his face in a second, and he looked away uncomfortably. “Oh...no, you really wouldn't – I'm terrible at Potions.”

“Really?” Ramsay asked, raising an eyebrow. “Seems to me Herbology and Potions work hand-in-hand.”

“Not for me,” Neville said embarrassedly. “I've just never gotten the hang of it. I actually was sort of happy not to take Potions this year,” his voice petered away into a low mumble, “at least until I found out that Professor Snape was teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts...”

Ramsay's face devolved into a sour frown, and he snorted disapprovingly. “Yes, well... Dumbledore does make some very *interesting* job appointments. But I'll grant that Snape, of all the people who work for Dumbledore, does likely know the Dark Arts better than anyone...though I find his *temperament* rather deplorable. Is it true he blatantly favors his own house over the others?”

“Mm-hmm,” Neville assented with a nod.

“And that he bullies his students?”

Neville gave something of a low, humorless laugh under his breath. “That's putting it lightly.”

Ramsay relaxed slightly, his face becoming more sympathetic and attentive – clearly he was ready to listen, and that expression encouraged Neville to go on.

“I mean...that's part of why I just decided...I wasn't going to work hard to get a Potions OWL. If I got one...then Gran would insist I continue taking it, and I...I don't know, I just...I couldn't do it anymore. I've had to take classes with Professor Snape every single week for five years, biting my tongue and cowering whenever he called me an idiot or took points off me or ridiculed my potions in front of the whole class. I just...I don't want to do that anymore. So I wasn't going to take Potions this year – I wasn't going to deal with him anymore. But then he took over Defense Against the Dark Arts, which I really like – Harry trained us in Defense last year, when Umbridge had taken over the whole school – and I *really* want to do well in it, particularly with what's going on right now! So now I've just got to suck it all up again, just to pass the class and learn everything I need to know...”

By the time he'd finished speaking, Neville looked flushed and frustrated, like he'd been keeping

his feelings bottled up for a long time and had finally been able to let them all out. Ramsay was visibly disturbed, but he kept his face purposefully stony as he put the Snargaluff plant back on the table.

“Neville...thank you for telling me this,” he said, and although his tone faintly betrayed the anger he felt, he kept it as gentle as he could. “I know it was hard, and I’m very...*very* sorry you had to deal with that. It’s not your fault, and it’s not fair – and I want you to know I do not think you are any sort of idiot. Okay?”

Neville gave a laugh, choking back a few tears. “...Thanks, Professor.”

Ramsay nodded. Clapping Neville on the back, he then got to his feet.

“Now, forgive me, but I have some *business* to attend to back at the castle...have a good class, Neville.”

Although Ramsay tried to project a level of cool, however, Neville couldn’t help but watch him leave with a little bit of uncertainty. Ramsay’s hand was running over the silver-tipped wand comfortably sitting in the loop on his belt, and it was visibly twitching.

When Ramsay headed back to the castle, he strode very quickly and with aggressive purpose. Several students heading off to class actually had to dart out of the way so that Ramsay wouldn’t ram into them. When Ramsay approached the Great Hall, he caught sight of a familiar dark-robed figure just outside the large double doors.

“Snape!”

Snape turned, and his black eyes grew very cold as they fell on Ramsay. The white-robed Potions professor strode right up to the black-robed Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, looking visibly angry.

“I want a word, right now,” demanded Ramsay.

“Oh?” said Snape, raising his eyebrows coolly. “Don’t you have plenty of your own, Ramsay? You always have such *colorful* turns of phrase.”

Ramsay’s eyes flashed dangerously. “Oh, piss off! I have met some *real* shit stains in my time – but *you*, Snape, are *beyond* the pale!”

“And what sin of mine merits that distinction?” Snape asked, though he sounded perfectly disinterested.

“Your treatment of Neville Longbottom,” Ramsay stated harshly. “I’ve just learned that you have been actively and personally bullying that poor boy for the last *five years* – called him an idiot, threatened to poison his toad, openly mocked him in front of his classmates – according to Neville, he even deliberately failed his Potions OWL because he didn’t want to be pressured to continue taking your fucking class!”

The students in the Great Hall had all hushed inside to listen. Even other students from outside the Hall had backtracked slightly so they could watch the argument.

Snape’s black eyes flickered menacingly.

“Longbottom has always been a hopeless student, which you would be aware of if you ever had the *pleasure* of teaching him,” he snapped.

“Pleasure of teach – oh, shut the fuck up!” said Ramsay, his voice rising. “Threatening your students doesn’t teach them a *damn* thing! Giving your own students favoritism for doing *fuck-all* teaches them even less!”

“I have my teaching methods and you have yours,” Snape replied icily. “Perhaps you should remember which one of us has been teaching longer.”

“Fuck off, you fucking fruit bat!” Ramsay roared.

Ramsay and Snape were now mere inches from each other with Ramsay getting right up in Snape’s face – Snape had always been rather tall compared to the other professors, so it was a little surreal seeing someone exactly his height pointing a finger and yelling at him without having to look up at all.

“You want to talk about how long you’ve been teaching?! All right, then – lost your first job in ’81, after your old boss You-Know-Who got pummeled the first time – ”

“Watch your tongue, Ramsay,” snarled Snape, his yellowish teeth bared.

But Ramsay pressed on, undeterred. “ – got hired here by some *fucking* miracle – taught children for almost fifteen fucking years – and then somehow in all of that time, never bloody figured out that you teach classes not to stroke your own ego, but to actually teach *the goddamn fucking classes!*”

“I will not listen to some *second-rate cook* telling me how to teach!” barked Snape.

“No one else is brave enough to do it, so I guess you’ll fucking well *have* to, you donkey-faced tosser!” shouted Ramsay.

“*Bravery*,” sneered Snape. “So says the man who, even after learning about the Dark Lord’s return, refused to stand and fight. You wouldn’t know bravery if it stung you in the face, Ramsay.”

This clearly got under Ramsay’s skin. His face paled, his eyes went a little wider and his fists clenched.

“You...pathetic...mold-infested dickhole!” he snarled. “So you fought in the wars! Good on you, you fuck-up! That still doesn’t excuse you being a *fucking twat* to your students!”

“In *your* modest opinion,” Snape said sardonically. “Again, I have trouble taking advice from someone who screams like a child because he’s too immature to contain his emotions.”

Ramsay gaped, looking shocked and furious. “Oh my fucking *God*, mate, are you *serious!*? *I’m* the immature one?! Remind me again, who, out of the two of us, is so determined to hate Harry Potter simply because his deceased father once hung him up by the ankle when they were kids?!”

BANG.

Snape had whipped out his wand and in a blast of white light Gordon Ramsay was flung across the room, colliding with a suit of armor on the other side of the hallway. Ramsay took out his wand also, prepared to fight back, but a moment later two large, translucent shields had appeared around them.

“That is *enough!*”

Professor McGonagall had arrived. She strode over to stand between Snape and Ramsay, her wand

and hand both raised and her expression very severe.

“Professors,” she reproached them, her voice quiet but incredibly cold, “I *highly* advise that you both return to your offices and keep your distance from each other for the remainder of the day. Am I understood?”

“Minerva – ” Ramsay started.

“*Am I understood*, Professor Ramsay?” McGonagall repeated, looking very stern.

Ramsay swallowed, his eyes flaring furiously at Snape over McGonagall’s shoulder. Then he looked at McGonagall and, exhaling loudly in aggravation, he lowered his wand, turned on his heel, and stomped away.

McGonagall’s face softened ever so slightly as she watched him leave. She understood why Ramsay was so upset, but he had acted inappropriately. As Deputy Headmistress, she knew the importance of the professors retaining self-control during these difficult times...and, admittedly, she knew they were in no place to fight amongst themselves, given the bigger enemies they had to face.

McGonagall turned to Snape, whose cold black eyes were blazing just as much as Ramsay’s had been as he lowered his wand.

“I’m very disappointed in you, Severus,” she told him baldly. “I would’ve thought that in Dumbledore’s absence, you would be more focused on holding the fort than engaging in petty squabbles.”

Snape held McGonagall’s gaze for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly, before turning on his heel just as Ramsay had and sweeping away without a word.

The Transfiguration professor turned to the students who had gathered on the staircases and in the doorway of the Great Hall to watch the fight.

“Move along now, all of you!” she said sharply. “Get to your classes!”

Everyone quickly dispersed. They could tell McGonagall was in no mood for disobedience.

Katie Bell

The blow-up between Snape and Ramsay was on the lips of every student in school for the first two weeks of October. There were rumors swirling that Ramsay had later blown up at Dumbledore and that Dumbledore had spoken to Snape directly about it. Harry believed the gossip, as Snape had been noticeably irritable in all of his classes, but had also refrained from much of his usual bullying. He still would never give Gryffindor points, but at least he wasn't actively taking them at every opportunity. He also very pointedly ignored everything Neville did in Defense Against the Dark Arts, good, bad, or indifferent, though judging by the ferocious glares he'd occasionally shoot in the boy's direction, it was clear that he hated holding his tongue.

Neville, for his part, thoroughly enjoyed the change in behavior.

"At least he's not yelling," he told Harry with a shrug and an almost wry smile.

It wasn't until the first Hogsmeade weekend of the year that there was something else to talk about.

When Hagrid carried the unconscious Katie Bell back to the castle, Professors McGonagall and Snape appeared immediately to investigate the cursed necklace Katie had touched. After taking testimony from the witnesses (Leanne, Harry, Ron, and Hermione), McGonagall reconvened a meeting in the staff room with the other professors.

Dumbledore arrived a few minutes after the rest of the teachers, taking a seat at the head of the staff table, right between Professors McGonagall and Snape, and looked around at everyone.

"Today in Hogsmeade," the Headmaster said gravely, "a Gryffindor student came into the possession of a cursed necklace. From what we have learned from witnesses, she was a victim of the Imperius Curse, which commanded her to take the necklace to the castle in an attempt to cause more damage. Unfortunately she accidentally touched the necklace herself and so was subjected to its dark magic."

The other teachers reacted with alarm. Professor Burbage, the Muggle Studies professor, had gone very white. Ramsay shot forward in his seat, grabbing the edge of the table.

"She's all right," Dumbledore reassured before Ramsay could ask. "Her hand only grazed the chain. Miss Bell has been sent to St. Mungo's, but the Healers there expect her to make a full recovery."

Ramsay closed his mouth and shifted back in his seat, though his forehead was still creased with concern.

"Who gave Miss Bell the necklace, Headmaster?" Burbage asked in a hushed voice.

"As of yet, we do not know," Dumbledore said quietly. "But we shall be putting more precautions in place, so as to raise awareness and promote safety in Hogsmeade village. The War is still raging, professors...however safe our school and its grounds may be, we must remain ever vigilant."

Ramsay exchanged a solemn look with the Arithmancy teacher, Professor Vector, who sat to his left. When he spoke up, his voice was brisk.

"...Dumbledore...if Katie was given that necklace in Hogsmeade, then we need to halt all student outings there until we find the person responsible."

Professor Flitwick glanced from Ramsay to Dumbledore in concern.

"Surely there's no need for that?" the tiny man squeaked. "If higher security is enacted..."

"We can't know if that extra security'll do any good unless we risk the students' safety," Ramsay cut him off seriously. "Katie was lucky this time -- who is to say the next one will be likewise?"

"But..." Professor Sprout interjected, looking concerned as well, "to take away *all* Hogsmeade privileges, for every student...going to Hogsmeade is so *important* to them. It'd no doubt feel like a punishment."

"Pomona's right, Gordon," said Burbage gently. "Our students need to get out of the castle -- to mingle, to have fun. With how bad everything is right now...they *need* that escape."

"Charity love, this is an issue of *safety*," Ramsay argued. "Fun is all well and good, but we cannot allow these children we've been entrusted with get wrapped up in a War they made no choice to fight in."

Snape gave a low snort under his breath. Ramsay's eyes went to him like a shot.

"Something you'd like to *say*, Snape?" he said in a challenging tone.

The smirk on Snape's face slid off as easily as if he had wiped it off with a napkin.

"These students are in the War, whether they choose it or not," he said seriously. "There are wolves prowling at our gate, and they'll have to be ready to face them -- locking all of our students up in the castle, even in the name of safety, will not do them much good in the long term."

Ramsay's eyes narrowed. "This school was not made to churn out little *soldiers* -- it's to *teach*, and these children's parents expect us to *protect* them while we do so!"

"No protection we provide will ever be full-proof," Snape said sharply. "Better that they learn to be vigilant *now*, rather than cripple them through coddling."

"Maybe *you're* all right sending out children to die for your cause, Snape, but I am sure as hell *not*!" Ramsay snapped.

"I'm well aware of how comfortable you've been, Ramsay," sneered Snape, "staying in your own little bubble for the last two years, pretending that nothing is happening, but the time for that is long since through."

"If you want to fight me, that's fine, but don't you fucking *dare* scold me for looking after these kids' best interest, you mangy tit!" Ramsay snapped, getting sharply to his feet.

"*Enough*," Dumbledore shut both of them down without raising his voice at all. "Severus, I would ask that you cease demonizing Gordon's reluctance to join the Order when I first asked it of him. He was more than within his rights to decline my offer. And Gordon, please control your temper. No one here has any intention of endangering the children of this school."

Ramsay whirled on Dumbledore, his eyes flashing. "Oh yeah? Remind me who in this room, upon the Chamber of Secrets being opened and a bunch of students getting petrified, kept the bloody school open anyway -- "

"Gordon!" McGonagall snapped at him fiercely.

Ramsay went silent, still fuming as he slowly settled back down in his chair. Dumbledore looked at Ramsay with nothing but indulgence and patience.

"...Gordon is right."

The professors looked startled.

"Headmaster..." started Sprout.

"Considering we do not know where the threat in Hogsmeade originated," Dumbledore said quietly, "perhaps it would be best...at least until the culprit is identified...to temporarily halt all student trips. I will make the announcement at dinner this evening."

Dumbledore stood. After a moment, the other teachers followed suit and started to file out of the room. Ramsay and Snape shot daggers at each other, but otherwise moved along; Ramsay left the room, Professor Vector just ahead of him.

"You won't keep your job long if you keep mouthing off like that," Vector said with a cool smile.

Ramsay snorted. "If they can't handle the truth, that's *their* problem, not mine."

"It'll be *your* problem too, if you lose your job," Vector pointed out. "I know you'll always have your restaurant to go back to...but I don't think your students would be too pleased, would they?"

Ramsay glanced at Vector out the corner of his eye, and then with a low sigh acknowledged her words with a single nod.

"I suppose."

Burbage came up on Ramsay's other side so as to join their conversation. She was much smaller than both Ramsay and Vector, so she had to walk a little faster to keep up with their longer strides.

"We understand your passion, Gordon, truly," said Burbage. "It might just be wiser to use it more productively."

Ramsay raised his eyebrows. "I seem to recall hearing that advice before...though you were even shorter then."

"And I was having to threaten you with detention so that you wouldn't beat up Donny Goff," Burbage replied lightly.

"Donny Goff was no one worth defending," Vector said, her eyes flashing. "I should know, given that I slept in the bunk under him for seven years."

Ramsay smiled wryly. "Felt pretty good on graduation day to be out of there, eh?"

"You have *no* idea," Vector sighed, rolling her eyes up toward the ceiling.

Burbage smiled slightly; then her expression turned much more pensive.

"...What I want to know is...who gave Miss Bell that necklace. I can't imagine anyone living in Hogsmeade being a Death Eater, so it must have been someone coming in from outside..."

"Not necessarily," Vector said solemnly. "There could be Death Eater sympathizers in the village...people acting as spies, since they're such a fixture that no one would suspect..."

"*No*," Burbage dissented. "We *know* those people, Septima -- Aberforth, Charlene, Theophilus, Rosmerta...they all *hate* the Death Eaters. I don't believe any one of them would betray Hogwarts -- betray Dumbledore."

"I agree," said Ramsay. "And because of that, I have faith that they'll help us find out who gave Katie that necklace and catch him."

"If the person is a Death Eater, catching him might prove difficult," Vector pointed out.

"True," said Burbage. "But at least if we know who it was, we can take steps...keep an eye out for that person, take advantage of his weaknesses. Like Fenrir Greyback -- he might be terrifying, but his magical talents are limited. And Avery may be excellent at wizard dueling, but he's notoriously dim-witted..."

Vector sighed. "Well, we'll see...I suppose the most important thing to do, in desperate times, is to stay positive."

Ramsay bid both of his coworkers goodbye as they headed up into the towers to start their next classes, while he headed down toward the dungeons. Even as he tried to focus on his class, however, he could not force the concern from his mind.

When the First Wizarding War was going on, he'd still been in school. He was only in his sixth year when the Potters died -- when the Longbottoms were driven into insanity -- when the Prewett brothers were killed in the height of battle -- when Dorcas Meadows was taken down by the Dark Lord personally -- when Robert McGonagall was devoured whole by a blast of Fiendfyre -- when Marlene McKinnon and her entire family were slaughtered -- when Benjy Fenwick was blown to smithereens --

All of them were so young. They'd all joined the Order right out of school and had all died before they'd turned 25. Every single one of them. And Ramsay never, *never* forgave Dumbledore for leading so many people he'd admired and sometimes even befriended to their doom. It didn't matter what the cause was -- Ramsay hated the Death Eaters just as much as anyone -- but they still had had families and friends and communities, and those were all destroyed upon their deaths. It was the responsibility of the world's *elders* to defend the world -- to protect the young, and help them thrive -- no young person should have to be obligated to fix an older one's mistakes!

Those people -- those young, idealistic people -- had put their loyalty and faith in Dumbledore...and, Ramsay thought, Dumbledore showed them no such loyalty in return. How much did he share with them? How much did he put the Order's members' well-being over the so-called "*greater good*?"

More than anything...Ramsay just wanted no other students, upon leaving Hogwarts, to have to die carrying Dumbledore's banner into battle.

Hogsmeade

The mood at Hogwarts was considerably despondent after Dumbledore's announcement ending Hogsmeade visits. It soon was circulated around school that it had been Professor Ramsay's suggestion, so the student body's favorable impression of Hogwarts's newest teacher had cooled significantly. Ramsay's classes had become noticeably tense, with many students refusing to answer his questions and speaking to him in very clipped, overly formal sentences. Hermione, of course, was one of the few who treated Ramsay with the usual amount of courtesy.

As November came and went and Hogsmeade visits were still nonexistent, even Harry found himself feeling some bitterness toward Ramsay. He still did well in Potions thanks to the Prince's book, but he took much less pride in it. He was just glad that he'd been able to get Ron into shape for their Quidditch match against Slytherin – at least Quidditch was one small escape from classes and news from the War against Voldemort.

The first week of December Harry, Ron, and Hermione got up early to see if there were any Hogsmeade announcements on the Gryffindor notice board. When they arrived, they found a large crowd already gathered around it -- Ginny emerged from the fold, and at the sight of them, she shook her head.

"Still no dates," she grumbled.

"Oh, *come on!*" said Ron angrily. "It's almost Christmas!"

"I guess we'll just have to order our gifts by owl," Hermione said quietly.

Ginny crossed her arms grumpily and sighed. "At least Ramsay didn't get it in his head to ban Quidditch, I guess...see you later."

She headed off through the portrait hole, presumably to get to breakfast.

"They'd find the culprit if they just questioned *Malfoy*," Harry muttered to Hermione and Ron.

Hermione groaned in exasperation. "Harry, Professor McGonagall said Malfoy was in detention

with her! He *couldn't* have been in Hogsmeade!"

"I *know* he had something to do with it," Harry insisted. "What he said on the train, about joining Voldemort -- "

"I'm very familiar with your *theory*, Harry, after the couple hundred times you've told it to us," Hermione cut him off tartly. "And I think you need to let it go!"

Seeing the tenseness between his two friends, Ron swiftly shifted gears.

"This whole thing wouldn't even *be* so bad if Ramsay hadn't flown so off-the-handle about it," he sighed. "I mean...we could try to catch the culprit *and* still go to Hogsmeade, right?"

Hermione frowned uncomfortably. "Well, it was clearly out of concern for us, wasn't it? Yes, it was...a *little* harsh...but the choice does make sense, if you think about it – "

"It only makes sense if you haven't been at Hogwarts in the last decade," Ron corrected her. "It's not like there are Death Eaters passing out cursed necklaces every other week. Yeah, maybe Hogsmeade got a bit complacent – didn't put up the kind of security measures everyone else has, since they figured they'd be safe out here in the middle of nowhere...but that doesn't mean the whole place is dangerous."

Harry nodded. "Right. Death Eaters could be *anywhere*, when we're outside of school. We just have to be careful, that's all."

Pouting slightly, Hermione returned her focus to her Charms homework.

"It *is* a shame we won't be able to go to Hogsmeade for our Christmas shopping," she acknowledged sadly.

When Potions class was over that day, Ramsay gave them the treat of no homework over the winter holidays. Although it did relieve the sixth years somewhat, there was still a faintly bitter note as the class filed out.

"Harry," Ramsay said abruptly, "may I see you after class, please?"

Faintly startled, Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione. Then, nodding at them to go ahead, he waited until everyone had filed out and then walked uncomfortably over to Ramsay's desk.

"Yes, Professor?" asked Harry.

Ramsay leaned up against the back of his desk, crossing his arms loosely over his chest.

"...That was some match last week," he said lightly.

Harry blinked. "Oh...thank you."

Ramsay studied Harry carefully as if he were X-raying him. Harry almost felt like he was talking to Snape for a second.

"Your friend Ron in particular did very well. That last goal he saved, by flipping upside down? Perfectly brilliant."

Harry felt very confused and faintly uncomfortable, so he waited for Ramsay to continue.

"You do remember, Harry, that I told you that the use of Felix Felicis for any competition or game is against the law?" Ramsay said solemnly.

"What?" said Harry.

Then it dawned on him.

"Oh – no, Professor – you don't understand -- "

He took out the tiny Felix bottle from his robes: it was still perfectly stoppered and full.

"It was a bluff," Harry explained guiltily, as Ramsay took it from him and examined it. "I made Ron *think* I'd put it in, to help his confidence...he's *really* a great Keeper – but he just gets so nervous and doubts himself so much that it hurts his performance. I thought if I could show him that he *is* that good, even without luck potion...well...then he'd see what I've always seen in him," he finished a bit lamely.

Ramsay looked from the tiny bottle to up at Harry. Then his face softened noticeably, with his lips curling up in a wry smile.

"...And he did. Very clever, Harry."

Harry smiled slightly in relief. "Thank you, sir."

Ramsay handed the little bottle back to Harry. "I'm sorry for my suspicion. I saw the bottle in your hand when you were talking to Ron the day of the match, and after seeing the game...well, I admit, I was concerned. James would certainly never have cheated to win a match...but he would've done just about *anything* to help his friends."

Harry's smile widened.

"...What position did you play?" he asked curiously, unable to help himself.

"Keeper, actually," Ramsay answered. "That's why I was so impressed with Ron's performance – I was almost reminded of myself, for a second."

"Ron would be pleased to know that," Harry said with a grin. "He said you were something of a prodigy at Quidditch."

Ramsay grinned too. "Oh really? Well, I don't know if I'd go *that* far...but I was much more than competent, certainly."

He then moved to sit behind his desk, adjusting a stack of essays he'd collected.

"All right, Harry, that was all. You're free to go."

Taking the hint, Harry turned to leave...but something made him hesitate. After a short moment, he turned back to Ramsay.

"Professor?"

"Yes, Harry?"

Harry bit his lip. Part of him really wanted to tell Ramsay about Malfoy, but Hermione's disdain was still fresh in his ears and it made him give pause. So instead he decided to say,

"...Is it true you suggested the Hogsmeade ban to Dumbledore?"

Ramsay frowned deeply. He put down the essay he'd been ready to start grading.

"...Yes, I did. If there are Death Eaters in Hogsmeade, then I don't think it's right that any of you be placed in harm's way."

"Yeah...but we're always going to be a *little* in harm's way," Harry said slowly. "I mean, a War's going on."

"And you all are not fighting in it," Ramsay said gravely. "You are students who need to focus on your future and your dreams for it. The Ministry and your teachers are the ones responsible for your safety – *they* should be the ones worrying about it."

"But sometimes the Ministry and the teachers *can't* deal with it!" said Harry. "Sometimes we have to do things ourselves! If we hadn't had Hogsmeade trips...we would never have formed the D.A. last year. It's somewhere where we can be free to try new things and have a laugh!"

Ramsay folded his hands seriously. "Harry, I understand why you're upset, but your safety is more important than you having fun. We professors are responsible for you, and even if the other professors haven't always acted like it, *I'm* going to."

Harry opened his mouth to argue further, but Ramsay shut him down.

"If you're going to ask me to tell the Headmaster that I've changed my mind and that we should reinstate Hogsmeade trips, then I'm sorry, but my answer is no."

Harry stared Ramsay down for a moment. Then, his green eyes narrowing, he tossed his schoolbag over his shoulder.

"Happy Christmas, Professor," he said coldly.

He strode out of the classroom, shutting the door sharply behind him and leaving Ramsay alone.

Ramsay's Announcement

As Christmas approached, the air in the castle was dark. Flitwick and Hagrid went all out with the decorations by decking every one of the gigantic Christmas trees with thousands of live pixies and sparkling garlands, but alas, being locked up in the castle had dampened everyone's mood.

On the day before Christmas break, Dumbledore started breakfast with the round of usual morning announcements. Just when the students assumed he was going to finish and start breakfast, however, Dumbledore paused. Then with a faintly amused smile, he turned his head slightly to indicate Ramsay, who sat three seats to his left between Professors Vector and Sprout.

"Finally...Professor Ramsay has a special announcement to share with you all."

Ramsay rose to his feet, looking out at the students of the Hall. Their eyes bore into him with both hesitation and suspicion.

"With the Headmaster's permission," Ramsay addressed everyone, putting on his best smile despite the lack of pleantry in his audience, "I am pleased to announce that this January and February, Hogwarts will be hosting its very first *MagicChef Junior competition!*"

The students released little outbursts of surprise.

"On the second day of term," Ramsay continued, "we will take applicants, and by the end of the week, we will have narrowed our competitors down to a top 12 of best student cooks. Those cooks will be excused from all homework while enrolled in the competition, and each week they will have to cook our panel of judges a spectacular dish that fits a theme of our choice. The winner of MagicChef Junior will not only earn 200 points for their house – " everyone at the student tables gave a great gasp of delight, " – but they will also win 5000 Galleons prize money and a free meal for their family at Hell's Kitchen in Wandsworth Green!"

By the time the announcement was complete, every student in the Hall was chattering in excitement.

Ramsay beamed. "If you wish to compete, brush up on your best recipes, your herbs and spices, and your cooking and baking flair over Christmas break. Auditions will be held in the dungeons on January 3rd and you'll have to bake me a fresh batch of your best holiday biscuits for a chance to

get into the top 12. Good luck to you all!"

He sat down, and Dumbledore led the students in a round of applause.

"We look very forward to *tasting* your efforts," Dumbledore said with a small smile. "In the meantime, however, I do believe I have left you all in suspense long enough."

He flourished his hands at the tables, and they were suddenly full of breakfast food.

"Tuck in!"

The announcement about the competition sent all of the students into a frenzy. Quidditch had been a great escape, but now they had something new and different to look forward to. The Ravenclaws were particularly excited as they were behind in points thanks to their loss in the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, and this contest might be the perfect way for them to catch up. Slytherin seemed very keen to win too, as the loss of Draco Malfoy as Seeker had hit their Quidditch team rather hard.

By the time everyone had gotten on the Hogwarts Express, all anyone was talking about was what cookie recipes they planned to use for the contest auditions.

"Do you reckon old fashioned chocolate chip will do?"

"No, of course not – this is *Gordon Ramsay* we're baking for – you need some *finesse*!"

"I'll just use one of Grandmother's old recipes – she was the heir to the *Quelle Magique* bakery, back before it closed..."

"*Oooh*, I *so* want to make it in!"

"I won a blue ribbon for my coconut cream pie back in second grade – this was *meant* for me!"

"Can you put mango in a biscuit?"

“Ugh, that sounds disgusting!”

“How much you want to bet half those girls thinking about entering are just doing it because they have a crush on Professor Ramsay?” snorted Ron.

“I’d say half the people in general,” Harry said amusedly. “Dean said Seamus just about *screamed* when he heard the announcement – apparently he and his mother Mrs. Finnegan have been sending fan letters to Ramsay for years.”

Hermione frowned disapprovingly at them both. “You two are impossible...”

She opened the door to an empty compartment and the three settled into it. Harry hoisted his trunk into the luggage rack on the right and Hermione put her suitcase up top on the left before getting Crookshanks out of his carrier. The ginger cat curled up on the window seat beside her with a pleased *murr*.

“Still, just *think* of it,” Ron said eagerly after he’d shut the compartment door behind them. “5000 Galleons and a free meal for your entire family at one of the best magical restaurants in the world? That’s unbelievable!”

“It is pretty cool,” agreed Harry. “I wouldn’t have thought everyone would get so into it.”

“Well, why not?” asked Ron. “I mean, it’s *only* a contest hosted by the most famous wizard chef in the country!”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know...I guess since no one really makes their own food around here, I never really thought about if anyone here liked to cook for fun. I mean, I can cook bangers and eggs, but that’s only because Aunt Petunia *made* me do it. I never really *liked* doing it.”

“Ah, well, you’re kind of an outlier, Harry,” Ron said bracingly. “There are plenty of wizards and witches who like cooking – I mean, Mum *adores* it! I reckon she’d be a bloody good restaurant chef herself, if she weren’t so busy looking after all of us...”

“Your mum’s cooking is the best,” Harry agreed. “Too bad *she* can’t enter the contest.”

Hermione had her finger resting on her lip thoughtfully, her eyes resting absently on Ron.

“Ron...why don’t you go for it?” she said abruptly.

“Huh?” said Ron.

“Why don’t *you* enter the contest?” Hermione asked, sounding a little more eager. “Your mum can’t do it, but I know you’ve learned some cooking from her!”

Harry’s face lit up. “Hey...yeah! Do you think your mum would teach you some recipes?”

“Well, sure...I *guess* she would, if I asked her,” Ron mumbled sheepishly. “I mean, she’s *always* had us in the kitchen whenever she could – helping her peel potatoes and dice carrots and stuff. Ginny was too stubborn to sit still and help and Fred and George would always try to spike the Shepherd's Pie with Sneezing Powder, so I ended up picking up the load a lot of the time...me and Percy, I mean...”

The thought of his estranged brother made Ron’s face contort unpleasantly. Both Harry and Hermione silently agreed in unison to get the conversation off of Percy quickly.

“Then why not try, Ron?” Harry asked. “I’m sure Ramsay would be impressed if you did – and you *did* say your mum’s been trying to get a reservation at Hell’s Kitchen for ages...”

Ron’s eyes lit up.

“...Yeah!” he said at last. “Yeah, why...why not? I’ll ask Mum! I wonder if I can get her to show me how to make her rosemary butter biscuits – those always impress Dad’s coworkers, around Christmas time!”

They talked over the various recipes Ron knew for the rest of the train ride. Hermione personally thought that coconut shortbread sounded best, while Harry was leaning more toward treacle sandwich biscuits. Harry felt a little bit bad that he’d never asked Ron about cooking before; the excited, but thoroughly expert way he talked about it reminded Harry a bit of how Ramsay would talk about Potions.

“It’s all sort of a balancing act, see?” Ron explained. “Like, take something sweet, like caramel. Put too much of it in, and it sort of overwhelms the taste buds. But if you counteract all that sweet and salt with something savory, like bacon, or something fruity, like pears, you kind of...wake everything up! The flavor’s not one-note, so it doesn’t get boring – it kind of *transforms* in your mouth.”

When Ron disembarked from the Hogwarts Express with Harry and Hermione several hours later, he had a new bounce in his step as he dashed over to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley on the platform.

“Mum!” he shouted jubilantly. “Mum, there’s something I need to tell you!”

Chocolate Cream Pie

Mrs. Weasley was thrilled at the news of Ramsay's competition. She insisted Ron help her with all of the meals over Christmas break so that he could practice.

Over the next two weeks, Ron learned how to cook an egg eleven different ways, quickly dice vegetables, and bake the perfect Shepherd's Pie. Harry had already loved Mrs. Weasley's cooking, but Ron helping in the kitchen too only seemed to make it ever better – not just because of Ron's own flair with spices, but because of how happy Mrs. Weasley clearly was to share her cooking knowledge with her youngest son.

On Christmas Eve, she gave Ron the reins with dessert. She left him her best chocolate cream pie recipe and then started work on the rest of dinner, while Ron started on the pie, carefully adding some of his favorite spices into the batter.

When dinner was over, Ron brought out a perfectly gorgeous-looking pie, to a round of applause from the entire table.

"Wow!" said Ginny.

"Oh, Ron, it looks delicious," beamed Hermione.

Ron's ears went a bright pink and he smiled shyly as he put down the pie and sat down.

"Looks like our baby brother can bake after all," said George, grinning. "Who would've thunk it?"

"I knew it all the time," Fred said sarcastically.

"It looks like something from a real bakery," Lupin said with a smile. "I'm impressed."

"Don't be impressed yet!" Mrs. Weasley said sharply, though she was smiling. "Taste *always* outranks appearances. Let's have a go at it – no, no, Harry, I'll go first, please."

She cut into her slice, removing a small piece and placing it gently in her mouth.

Her eyes widened. Then, to everyone's surprise, they abruptly filled with tears and her hand flew to her mouth as she let out a quiet squeak.

"Mum?" Ron asked anxiously. "Oh no – did I put in too much chili powder? I'm so, *so* sorry, I thought it'd balance the chocolate – "

Mrs. Weasley choked. "No! No, no – it's just – just a *little* hotter than I expected..."

Her face was turning red as she took out her wand, materialized some water in a nearby glass, and chugged it down. Once she'd gathered herself, she exhaled loudly.

"*Whew!* That *does* have a kick," she laughed.

Seeing the look on Ron's face, Mrs. Weasley quickly bustled over to him.

"Oh, Ronald, don't you fret," she said soothingly, patting his head gently. "It was a *lovely* idea! You just need to make sure you taste-test the batter beforehand – all chefs do that if they're adding onto a recipe, to make sure that the balance of ingredients is right. And in the meantime..."

With a wave of her wand, she made everyone's glasses fill to the brim with cold milk and then added a thick layer of fluffy whipped cream onto Ron's pie.

"...That should help!"

Harry had to admit, Ron's pie definitely left a spicy aftertaste...but for what it was worth, he thought it was actually pretty good. The whole thing sort of dreamily melted in your mouth.

Mrs. Weasley wasn't the only one excited about Ron competing. Bill's fiancée Fleur tried to give Ron some of her own cooking tips; unfortunately her attention was more of a hindrance than a help, since Ron was too distracted by her Veela glamour to take in much of what she said.

“You Britons tend to roast ze food and it dries out terribly,” Fleur explained as she roasted a pan of chicken over the fire while Ron watched. “Now when you *flambé* ze meat with just a hint of wine, it locks in all zat flavor and aroma – ”

“Yeah,” Ron said, clearly too dazed to take in everything she was saying. “Cool.”

Hermione frowned deeply as she, Harry, and Ginny watched the two of them from the living room.

“Hmph! I wonder what *Professor Ramsay* would say about her attitude toward British food,” she muttered grumpily as she crossed her arms tightly over her chest.

“Probably that she’s a hoity-toity twit with her head up her arse and her taste buds stuck back in the Middle Ages,” Ginny said with a smirk.

Harry laughed.

Christmas was rather fun overall, excluding the awkward visit from the new Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour. He’d asked to see Harry privately, but the meeting between the two didn’t last long, ending in raised voices and Scrimgeour stomping away from the Burrow in a huff.

When Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny all got ready to board the Hogwarts Express again, Mrs. Weasley pulled Ron aside and gave him a big, squeezing hug.

“All right, Ron,” she said in a business-like tone, “keep me posted...and if you need any help, send an owl to me anytime, all right?”

“Okay, Mum,” Ron said with a nod.

Mrs. Weasley patted his cheek proudly. “That’s my boy.”

“Good luck at the audition,” said Mr. Weasley brightly. “We’ll keep our fingers crossed!”

The train whistle blew, and everyone had to shuffle onboard as it prepared to leave the station. Ron

waved to his parents on the platform until they were out of sight – then he, Hermione, Ginny, and Harry started up off the corridor.

“We better go meet with the other prefects, Ron,” Hermione reminded him.

“Oh,” said Ron, faintly put out. He always felt a little uncomfortable whenever he had to go to prefect meetings – even though Draco Malfoy hadn’t shown up to the last one, they still were always a little stilted. Plus he always hated leaving Harry alone.

Ron and Hermione bid Ginny and Harry goodbye and headed up toward the compartment that always held the prefect meetings. When they arrived, they found a few familiar faces amongst the prefects assembled – the two 6th year Hufflepuff prefects, Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan and the two 6th year Ravenclaw prefects Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil. Noticeably absent, once again, were the two 6th year Slytherin prefects.

“So Malfoy and Pansy are no-shows again, huh?” Ron muttered to Hermione under his breath with a bit of a grin. “Man, are you sure *today* isn’t Christmas?”

Hermione stifled her laugh behind her hand, trying to stay serious.

“...It *is* kind of weird,” she murmured back. “I suppose Pansy just doesn’t have any interest in Prefect duties unless she can do them with Malfoy. And if *Malfoy’s* not here...well, no point in her being here either, right?”

“It’s probably just as well,” Ernie Macmillan forcefully interjected himself into their conversation. “They never really upheld the responsibilities of a Prefect.”

He smiled and shook each of their hands pompously in turn. “Good to see you, Ron – Hermione.”

“Hi, Ernie,” Ron greeted offhandedly.

“Did you know Hannah’s going out for the MagicChef contest?” Ernie asked, grinning proudly over his shoulder at her.

“*Ernie*,” said Hannah, smiling uncomfortably. “You don’t have to brag about it – ”

“I think she’ll make it to the top two easily,” Ernie continued over Hannah’s objections, “despite her modesty.”

“Ron’s auditioning too,” said Hermione quickly.

Hannah’s face brightened. “You cook too, Ron?”

“Well...” Ron started uncomfortably. “I learned from Mum, yeah...she’s always had us in the kitchen...”

“He’s perfectly brilliant,” Hermione cut him off forcefully.

“Well, we’ll see,” Ernie said with a wry smile. “I have to wonder if Ron could make Yorkshire Pudding quite as well as Hannah – no offense, of course, Ron.”

“None...taken?” Ron said awkwardly.

“Well, Ron’s chocolate cream pie is the best I’ve ever tasted,” Hermione replied coolly. There was something of a strange edge to her voice – it almost reminded Ron of when Ginny would argue with him about their favorite Quidditch teams.

“Just try Hannah’s lemon meringue,” said Ernie, clearly trying to keep toe-to-toe with Hermione even though his tone feigned much more pleasantry. “It’ll put Ramsay himself to shame, just you wait – ”

Hannah looked just as uncomfortable as Ron felt during this whole exchange. Hermione opened her mouth to argue further, but Ron stepped in.

“All right, time-out!” he said with an awkward chuckle. “Let’s have a nice meeting and leave the competition to Ramsay, eh?”

Hannah nodded in overly passionate agreement. “Yes, please!”

Ron was very glad to finish up with all the formalities and leave the prefects’ compartment to go find Harry. As he and Hermione walked down the hall, he glanced at her out the corner of his eye.

“Hermione?” he said lowly, his ears going pink. “Thanks for sticking up for my cooking...even though my pie wasn’t that great.”

Hermione looked at him in surprise. Then she looked away quickly, her cheeks flushing.

“Oh! Y-you’re welcome...”

She then looked back up at him, her pink face faintly upset.

“But really, your pie was lovely! Sure, it was a little spicy, before your mum added the cream and milk, but...well, you’re still learning, right?”

“Sounds like Hannah’s a bit ahead of me,” Ron mumbled gloomily. “Getting a meringue right is pretty hard – the consistency has to be both fluffy and yet stiff enough that it doesn’t fall apart when you cut into the pie. That takes a lot of talent...”

“You’ll do brilliantly, Ron,” Hermione said sharply. “I know it.”

Ron looked up at her, his blush creeping down from his ears to the rest of his face. Hermione looked very pink too, and she looked like she was fighting with herself not to break eye contact.

Ron’s mouth slowly curled up into a small smile, and he lightly leaned his shoulder against hers as they walked together.

“...Thanks, Hermione.”

The Audition

The day of the audition, Ron barely ate anything at breakfast. It was the best indicator to Harry of just how nervous he was, and he and Hermione tried their best to reassure him.

“You know the biscuit recipe,” said Hermione sympathetically, “and you know how to bake them – that’s all you have to do in the audition at least, right?”

“Right,” said Harry. “You’ve got this, Ron.”

Ron smiled weakly, clearly not that comforted but appreciating the gesture all the same.

When he went down to the dungeons that morning, he found a long line of students already standing outside Ramsay’s office. Ron inwardly grumbled to himself that he wished he’d brought one of his *Martin Miggs* comic books to keep him preoccupied, as it took hours for him to get through the line and the waiting only served to make him *more* nervous.

Upon getting closer to the front, he noticed that students were entering in groups of 12 – a ways ahead of him, he noticed Hannah Abbott going in, as well as Padma Patil and the new Slytherin Seeker Roy Harper.

Ron glanced around at the people in front of and behind him – he didn’t recognize any of them. Most of them looked to be in Slytherin or Hufflepuff, and they were all younger than him. He caught the eye of one of the Slytherin girls, and to his surprise she actually offered him a small smile.

“Nervous?” she asked him.

Ron was so startled that he gave a self-conscious laugh. “Heh...yeah, a little bit.”

The girl nodded.

“It’s my first time competing in something like this too,” she said levelly. “I’ve baked at home before, but never in a competition.”

“Me either!” said Ron, pleasantly surprised by her sympathy. “I’ve barely even baked at home... Mum’s always had us in the kitchen, but...well, I’ve never really *actively* cooked on my own since this last Christmas...”

Saying it out loud made Ron feel even worse. He really was a long shot to get much of *anywhere* in this whole thing. Part of him started to wonder if he shouldn’t just leave the line now and head back upstairs...

The girl crossed her arms, her black eyes soft despite the discerning look on her face. Even if she was younger than him, Ron got this feeling she was unusually sharp for her age – even her curly hair and complexion reminded him a bit of Hermione, though she had her hair done in intricate cornrows that pushed all of the braided hair to flow down her right shoulder.

“You’re Ron Weasley, aren’t you?” she asked, though judging by the tone of her voice, she seemed to already know the answer to her question.

“Uh...yeah?” Ron replied awkwardly.

She smirked. “Well...considering that everyone underestimated you before your last Quidditch match...I most *certainly* am not going to underestimate you today!”

She extended a dark hand to him, offering him an almost daring expression.

“May the best novice win!” she said decisively, her black eyes and white smile blazing.

Ron was startled by the gesture. Then, his face breaking out into a small smile, he took her hand and shook it.

“All right. Yeah.”

It was their turn. Ron headed on in with ten others and the Slytherin girl into Ramsay’s classroom – it felt like all of them were holding their breath as they stepped over the threshold.

The room had once again been completely transformed. All of the desks were gone and were replaced with twelve cooking stations, complete with a small oven, a set of burners, a short countertop, and a rollaway butcher's block complete with drawers full of cooking utensils. Ramsay stood at the front of the room, dressed in his usual white robes and his arms lightly crossed over his chest.

"Hello, everyone," he greeted them. "Pick a station, and we'll get started."

Everyone rushed into place. Most of Ron's competition bustled up toward the front, but he decided after a moment to just pick the station closest to him. The Slytherin girl with the braids patiently let everyone else run to the front and so ended up in the station just to the top right of Ron.

"Welcome to the auditions for MagicChef Junior," said Ramsay. Ron didn't want to even *contemplate* how many times Ramsay had likely made this speech that day and how many more times he'd have to repeat it, but fortunately the Potions professor acted as though he was saying it for the first time. "You will have exactly 30 minutes to bake me a batch of your best holiday biscuits. You each have a kitchenette, of course...but you'll also have an assistant during this first challenge."

The room suddenly erupted in *cracking* noises. Several students flinched and cried out in surprise, but Ron wasn't one of them, for he recognized the sound. A whole assortment of house elves had appeared in the room, each of them appearing on the countertop of one of the student's workstations. Ron looked up at the elf at his station and his eyes widened.

"*Dobby!*"

"Master Weasley, sir!" greeted Dobby brightly. He grabbed onto Ron's hand, shaking it heartily with both of his. "So good to see you again!"

"Good to see you too, Dobby," said Ron. He noted the ugly red woolen cap on Dobby's head that the elf had trimmed holes out of so that his bat-like ears could poke out of the top and grinned, knowing full well that Hermione had made that hat (and a couple dozen like it) a few years earlier in an attempt to forcibly free all the Hogwarts house elves.

Everyone turned to look at Dobby and Ron as they shook hands. Ramsay smiled.

"These house elves work down in the Hogwarts kitchens," he said. "They will be here to fetch any

and all ingredients and tools you need to bake your cookies from their pantry. They have been instructed, however, to not help you with the baking itself – they will only fetch things for you. Your time starts...now.”

The classroom immediately erupted in hustle and bustle. The other competitors all started grabbing baking tools and shouting at their house elf partners to get what they needed. Ron took an extra couple of seconds to gather his thoughts – then he turned to Dobby.

“All right, um...Dobby, can you get me butter, rosemary, sugar, a lemon...two eggs...flour, baking soda...oh, and salt? Please?”

“Right away, Master Weasley!” Dobby said brightly.

He disappeared with a *crack*. A moment later, he’d popped back with the rosemary and butter; then the lemon and eggs. Ron got right to work peeling the lemon and then grating the peel as Dobby returned with the flour, sugar, and baking soda.

The next 15 minutes were some of the most fast-paced and grueling Ron had ever known in his life. He couldn’t even pay attention to anything else going on in the kitchen because of the grind that the limited timetable had put him under. He just had to keep focused on one lone fact – his biscuits needed to bake in the oven for 12-15 minutes. Therefore he *had* to have his unfinished biscuits on the baking sheet and looking perfect in 18 minutes or less.

“Fifteen minutes left,” called Ramsay’s voice over the din.

All of the students gave panicked outbursts. Ron hurriedly rolled his dough into little balls and soaked each of them in a sugar and butter mix before placing them nimbly on the baking sheet. He glanced up at the Slytherin girl in front of him – she picked up a sheet full of her biscuits, which were cut into little donut-like shapes, and put them in the oven.

It was then that Ron realized he’d forgotten something.

“Dobby!” he said urgently. “I need a biscuit cutter...can you get me one? It doesn’t matter what kind!”

“Right away, sir!” said Dobby.

He disappeared with another *crack*, and Ron hurriedly worked on rolling the rest of his biscuits.

The minutes on the clock seemed to drag painfully while Ron waited for Dobby – even though only two minutes had gone by, it had felt like *forever* before the house elf returned. Unfortunately he returned empty-handed.

“There were no biscuit cutters left, Master Weasley,” Dobby said despondently. “The only ones in the cupboard are being used.”

The elf pointed to the front of the classroom, at five of Ron’s competitors using star and round biscuit cutters.

Ron’s eyes darted up to the clock. He only had thirteen minutes – if he didn’t get the biscuits in the oven *right now*, there’d be no chance that they’d be done in time. He racked his brain, trying to think of something.

‘No biscuit cutters – could I decorate them with frosting? No, the piping alone would take too much time – ’

“Are there any biscuit molds in the kitchen, Dobby?” he asked.

“I don’t believe so, sir,” Dobby said sadly.

‘Damn!’ Ron thought in frustration.

His eyes shot from the clock to Dobby and back. What else might the house elves have in the pantry that he could use to decorate the biscuits? They did a lot of cooking – they made *everything* at mealtimes, from the turkeys to the hot chocolate –

The hot chocolate...

Ron’s eyes lit up. “Dobby – I need one of the mugs that you all use to put our hot chocolate in –

you know, the real old ones?”

Dobby didn't seem to understand, but he nodded. “Yes, sir!”

He disappeared with another *crack*. About fifteen seconds later, he was back, holding an old-fashioned mug emblazoned with the Hogwarts crest in one hand.

“Thanks, Dobby!” said Ron, beaming.

He took the mug and very gently pressed the bottom of it down on top of his balls of dough to flatten them, before flipping the mug over and lightly pressing the Hogwarts coat of arms into the top of the compressed biscuits. It left a softly marbled impression with the shape of a tiny shield in the center of the dough. Ron quickly snatched up his baking sheet and put it in the oven, turning the oven up as hot as he dared.

The next eleven minutes were the longest in Ron's life. He watched the cookies tensely through the oven window, pacing back and forth. He glanced at his competitors – some of the students in the front were decorating their plates with frosting and garnish. Thinking he needed something to pass the time and distract himself from the tension, Ron took some of the leftover rosemary and chopped it up into sweet little clusters, so as to decorate his plate with them.

When the rosemary butter biscuits came out of the oven, they were a light yellowish tan, with the faintest hint of brown around the impressions Ron had made with the mug. They actually looked pretty good!

“Thirty seconds!” called Ramsay.

Ron hurriedly put on his oven mitt, retrieved the biscuits from the oven, and very carefully scooped them off with a spatula onto his plate.

“Ten – nine – eight – ”

Ron arranged the biscuits in a disheveled stack.

“Six – five – four – ”

Ron tossed his sprigs of rosemary onto the plate on either side of the biscuits.

“Two – one – time’s up!” said Ramsay. “Hands off your biscuits!”

All the students stepped back from their stations. Ron exhaled heavily – his head was pounding and his heart was racing. He looked around at the other competitors and was unsurprised to see similarly overwhelmed faces. One Hufflepuff boy already had tears streaming down his face, while one of the Slytherin girls was holding onto the countertop with a vice grip as if she was trying not to faint.

Each of the competitors in turn came up to the front of the classroom to present their biscuits. Most of the students’ work clearly didn’t impress Ramsay, being too dry or underdone, but he was cordial. One exception was the Slytherin girl with the braids, who Ramsay identified as Bridget – she presented a plate of coffee and brown sugar biscuits shaped like donuts, which Ramsay found very inventive and delicious.

‘She’ll make it in the top 12 easy,’ Ron thought to himself.

When it was his turn to present his biscuits, Ron tried to walk straight and tall, even despite his knocking knees.

“Hello, Ron,” Ramsay greeted him pleasantly.

Ron smiled weakly. “Hi, Professor.”

“What have you made for me today?”

“Rosemary butter biscuits...th-they’re my mum’s recipe. She bakes them every year for my dad’s friends at the office.”

Ramsay picked up one of Ron’s biscuits, examining it critically.

“Your presentation of the biscuits is lacking,” he said slowly. “It’s little more than a stack...but the pattern on top – what did you use for this?”

“A...Hogwarts mug, sir,” Ron answered sheepishly.

Ramsay blinked – then his expression morphed into a small smile.

“Very interesting,” he said. “Why did you use that?”

“There were no more biscuit cutters,” Ron answered, “and there were no molds in the kitchen... and I only had a minute left before my biscuits had to be in the oven, for them to finish on time, so...”

“So you improvised,” finished Ramsay, his smile widening. “Very good, Ron.”

Ron’s heart fluttered in a giddy mixture of relief and excitement.

“Thanks!” he breathed.

Ramsay’s expression turned more serious as he slowly broke the biscuit in his hand in half.

“Looks a *touch* underdone,” he said lowly. “See how it crumbles, like that? I think a minute more would’ve probably done this some good.”

Ron bit his lip as Ramsay took a bite. He chewed and swallowed, his eyes resting on Ron thoughtfully.

“...Your rosemary and butter flavors are both excellent,” he said levelly. “They balance each other very nicely. I can see why your mother gets compliments for these.”

Ron grinned broadly.

“However,” Ramsay continued, his tone not shifting, “the flavors themselves are very muted. They work all right for a holiday potluck – but they’re a *touch* underwhelming for a student baking competition. Do you think you can step up, if you make it into the top 12?”

“Yes, sir!” Ron said at once, even despite his heart pounding against his ribs. “I mean – I’d sure like to try!”

Ramsay considered Ron carefully – Ron tried very hard to guess what he was thinking, but his expression was a perfectly unreadable mask. Then Ramsay inclined his head in a nod.

“You should be very proud of yourself, Ron,” he said kindly. “Well done on your biscuits.”

“...Thank you, sir.”

As Ron stepped back, he wasn’t sure how to feel.

Had he convinced Ramsay? Had he not? Had he made it? Had he not?

Even as he went back up to the Gryffindor common room, told Hermione and Harry about his audition, and went to bed that night, those questions still rattled in his head.

Had he convinced Ramsay? Had he not? Had he made it? Had he not?

Ron didn’t sleep a wink. When Harry got up the next morning, Ron immediately pressured his best friend to go downstairs with him to go check the notice board.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, they found a common room filled with cheering and screaming people.

“Hey, it’s Ron!” said Seamus Finnegan.

Everyone cheered, abruptly descending on Ron in a mob to pat his back and chant his name.

“WEASLEY! WEASLEY! WEASLEY!”

“Wha – huh – ?!” Ron said, hardly daring to believe it.

Hermione shoved herself through the crowd and threw both of her arms around Ron, squeezing him tightly.

“You *did* it, Ron!” she squealed excitedly as she pulled away. “You were only one of *two* Gryffindors who made it into the top 12!”

Ron glanced at Harry, who was grinning from ear to ear.

“Congratulations, Ron!” he said brightly.

Ron was stunned. He couldn’t believe it. Was this just an amazing dream, or...?

With some difficulty he forced himself to the front of the crowd to look at the notice board.

The list of names was divided by house, with their years marked next to them...and there it was, in black and white.

Hufflepuff

Rose Zeller (2nd year)

Owen Cauldwell (3rd year)

Kevin Whitby (4th year)

Hannah Abbott (6th year)

Ravenclaw

Arjuna Belaji (4th year)

Astoria Greengrass (4th year)

Cho Chang (7th year)

Slytherin

Bridget Jaheem (4th year)

Millicent Bulstrode (6th year)

Daphne Greengrass (6th year)

Gryffindor

Colin Creevey (5th year)

Ron Weasley (6th year)

Hannah

Hannah hadn't slept a wink the night before the MagicChef audition results came out either. She'd been too excited to get started in the competition to even think about sleeping!

The audition had gone pretty well. Hannah had made Ramsay her favorite mocha chocolate chip biscuits, baked into the shape of tiny cups and served with ice cold milk. Ramsay had been very pleased with her creativity and her flavors, so Hannah was modestly sure that she had a good chance of making it.

The night after the audition Hannah sat up in bed, her wand lit up in her lap as she skimmed through a copy of *Enchantment in Baking*, making notes in the margins. She was just editing the herbs she would want to add to a good steak and kidney pie when she heard a rustle of the curtains.

"Hannah?"

Hannah looked up -- Susan Bones, rubbing the side of her face tiredly, was peeking through her bed curtains.

"Oh, sorry," whispered Hannah. "Did I wake you up?"

Susan yawned. "No, no...just needed the loo. What are you still doing up?"

"Couldn't sleep," Hannah said with a shrug.

Susan sat down on the floor, letting Hannah's bed curtains drape around her as she leaned her head and arms on Hannah's bed.

"...We've got class in the morning, you know," Susan reminded her.

"Oh, I know," Hannah answered with a small smile. "I just...I can't help it, I'm excited!"

Susan smiled sleepily as Hannah continued.

"I mean, you know how long I've been saving up and brushing up on Muggle technology and stuff, so I can go to culinary school...if I had Gordon Ramsay's seal of approval on my cooking too..."

"It'd probably be that much easier to open some fancy restaurant somewhere," Susan agreed tiredly.

"Right!" said Hannah brightly.

Susan adjusted her arms on the bed, her face getting a little more serious. "I'm sure you'll get in...you're more than good enough. But the competition's sure to be difficult -- Ramsay's got pretty high standards."

Hannah looked back down at the page of the cookbook thoughtfully. "Yeah..."

She looked up with a small smile. "...Well, I'm willing to work hard to impress him! That's all I can really do, right?"

Susan smiled tiredly. "Mm-hm."

She yawned again. "Well...I'm going back to bed. Try to get a little sleep, okay?"

Hannah nodded, and Susan returned to her bed. Despite her assent, however, Hannah did not get any sleep -- her mind was racing too fast imagining the amazing restaurant she'd open in Diagon Alley after graduation.

It'd be bright, and open, and friendly, and warm. Hannah had always loved the idea of long tables, like the sort in a German Biergarten -- ones that allowed all of the guests to sit together in one space, rather than cloistering themselves away in separate, darkened corners. There would be lots of natural light and several large brick fireplaces, and there would be a large mural along the back wall of the restaurant, covered in dragons, hippogriffs, unicorns, and winged horses. Each table would be made of warm oak and each chandelier would be made of crystal. The food would be fresh, hot British comfort food -- Toad in the Hole, Yorkshire Pudding, Fish and Chips, Mince Pies, and Roast Potatoes -- and around Christmas time, the restaurant would host grand parties featuring live musicians and lots of dancing.

With how the War was going...the thought of making a place like that sounded so, *so* good...

Hannah put down her quill for a second. Her eyes drifted up to the hangings over her head.

Thirteen Muggles killed last summer -- Stan Shurnpike arrested as a Death Eater -- Katie cursed in Hogsmeade...there was so much fear and confusion and grief to be found everywhere. Hannah had gone down to bake in the kitchens a lot this school year -- keeping her hands busy baking something sweet for her friends always helped her keep her mind busy too, so she didn't have to think about the War.

So Hannah returned her mind to the make-believe restaurant in her mind's eye.

It would be such a wonderful place... It'd be a lighthouse in this dark time -- a sanctuary, where everyone would feel welcome, safe, and at home.

When the sun came up, Hannah decided to wait in the common room until the notice was put up. As the common room filled, she passed the time skimming through the recipes she'd annotated, wondering what kinds of food Ramsay would ask them to make for the competition.

'I hope there's a round where we can make pies,' Hannah thought brightly. Blackberry was the one she liked baking the most -- it was her mother's favorite, and she loved baking it on her birthday in place of a cake.

When Professor Sprout finally arrived early that morning, paper in hand, it took Hannah all of her self-control not to sneak a peek. When it was up, Hannah found her name near the very top.

She couldn't stop herself from cheering out loud.

"YEEEEEEAAAAH -- "

Sprout hushed her quickly, pointing down at the floor to indicate her housemates sleeping downstairs. Hannah covered her mouth with both hands trying to contain her excitement, and Sprout gave her a softer, prouder expression.

"Congratulations," Hufflepuff's Head of House whispered.

Hannah grinned from ear to ear.

"*Thanks!*" she squeaked back.

She twirled around the room giddily, before packing up her things and heading out of the common room. She had to go bake something in the kitchen to celebrate -- maybe a creme brûlée!

Daphne

Daphne Greengrass slept poorly after the audition. Ramsay's response to her almond spritz biscuits had been lukewarm to her mind, and to her frustration Daphne had had trouble getting a good fix on what Ramsay was thinking. To make matters worse, she knew Astoria was also competing -- and as much as Daphne knew she'd hate losing, she knew she'd hate it even *more* if she lost to her younger sister.

Daphne woke up the next morning and took her sweet time heading downstairs, picking out her prettiest gold earrings and slowly pinning up her hair. She really didn't want to let on how badly she wanted to make it in, so she figured if she walked downstairs casually, she'd be able to obscure any disappointment she might feel if she wasn't on the list, and hear congratulations from everyone else beforehand if she was.

She put on her dark red lipstick, puckering her lips once to make sure it looked right, before applying her eye shadow and long false lashes.

Daphne was sharp enough to know that in many ways, she was quite superficial. She valued how people presented themselves and looked down on those who did so poorly. But at the same time, she knew that appearances were important -- although they could sometimes be deceiving, if you were sharp enough, they could tell you a lot. The people that dressed poorly often had low self esteem, or just didn't care enough to make a good impression. They didn't care about advancement. They were complacent, lazy, and often ignorant about the world around them. They deluded themselves into thinking that they could just "plug out" and not play the game, and still get everything they wanted anyway. In other words, they were people Daphne wanted nothing to do with. The people who dressed to impress, like she did, understood that people invariably do judge each other...and that if you want to get anywhere, sometimes you just have to work with what you have and project an image that both you and the world will like...

That balancing act was hard sometimes...but she was resilient enough. She could handle it. She could handle herself.

"Damn," Daphne hissed under her breath; she'd accidentally dropped the lash she'd been applying.

She picked it up and applied it perfectly the second time; looking herself over, she decided she looked presentable, and left the bathroom. Outside waiting for her was her dormmate Pansy Parkinson, who was fixing her hair.

"Ugh, the curl's already come out," she griped.

"Use Foxglove's next time," Daphne advised. "Sleekeasy is a perfect joke when it comes to hair..."

Pansy turned around so her hair faced Daphne. "Put it up for me."

Daphne indulged her, quickly tying up Pansy's short black bob in a short updo. Pansy never put in the proper work with her hair because she knew Daphne was good at it and could pick up her slack. Daphne would've probably told Pansy to do it herself were it not for her needing to stay on the Parkinson family's good side...and she *needed* to be on their good side...

Once she was done, Pansy looked her hair over in the bathroom mirror. Satisfied, she bustled downstairs. Daphne descended slowly behind her. When she arrived in the common room, Daphne found Pansy milling around the room like a bulldog sniffing around for something.

'*Looking for Draco,*' Daphne thought to herself with a covert roll of her eyes. She could understand the sway of a romantic girl's emotions, but for the life of her, she would *never* understand Pansy. Draco was clearly just not interested anymore, but Pansy still clung on like a crazed grindylow.

At that moment Daphne's other dormmate, Tracey Davis, came up to greet her.

"Congratulations, Daphne!" she said with a triumphant grin.

Daphne despite herself was taken aback. "What?"

"You made it into the top 12," said Tracey. "You and Millicent...and Bridget, you know, the fourth year Muggle-born?"

Daphne was stunned -- she *made* it? *Really*?

She went over to the board and skimmed through the names until she found hers. She stared at it for a long while, before she became aware of the fact that she was grinning from ear to ear. Struggling to regain her composure, since she knew her teeth were not that pretty, she put forward her best closed-mouth smirk as she faced the rest of the common room. She noticed Millicent

migrating across the room and inclined her head to her politely.

"Congratulations, Millicent."

Millicent looked back with a thoroughly uncaring eye. "Made it then, did I?"

"Yes," said Daphne. Despite herself she couldn't help but eye the larger girl curiously. "I'm surprised you went out for it."

Millicent shrugged dismissively and headed over to look at the board herself. Daphne watched her go, before quickly strolling back the way she came. Several other students congratulated her as she headed back upstairs.

When she reached the 6th year Slytherin girls' dorm, Daphne closed the door and bent down to reach under her bed. She pulled out a worn brown leather book with a tiny silver lock on it; with a tap of her wand, she opened it.

Inside were countless magical pictures, drawings, and handwritten paragraphs, all written like journal entries. It was a scrapbook...but there were two different types of writing in the book, and before Daphne's very eyes, an entry was being written, as if by an invisible hand.

Jan 4, 1997

Dearest Daphne,

I got many compliments on your silver pocket watch today. Forgive me, but I had to lie and say that Father had purchased it for my birthday, since Tulsa was in earshot. I look at it now and long to be looking into your blazing eyes. I beg of you, let me know of Ramsay's contest as soon as you know. I have our cottage in Bulgaria all picked out, and I have gotten Old Uncle Parkinson's blessing. With his support, I hope to present my intent to marry you to my father this upcoming summer, after your birthday. That summer cannot come fast enough!

Stay forever of spring, sweet Laurel. обнимаю me.

Rudolf

Daphne beamed at the sight of the wonderful words, perfectly uncaring about how badly her gum line showed in her unattractively toothy grin. She bent down and kissed the page, leaving a soft impression of red lips behind, and then scribbled a quick response.

Jan 4th, 1997

My Rudolf,

I made it! Please tape in pictures of our house so that I may see it. I want to imagine the two of us standing outside of it every day of this competition.

обучам me! To the moon and back I shall love you...

Daphne

Arjuna

Arjuna Belaji slept very well after the audition. She wanted to make sure she was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed first thing in the morning so that she could see the results first thing. Then she could properly scope out her competition, brush up on braising and sautéing, and memorize all the recipes she could before the first round of the contest.

Arjuna had been confident from the start that she would get a spot in the MagicChef Junior competition. Her mother had taught her everything she knew about cooking, and Arjuna had earned three blue ribbons in local cooking competitions. She'd even once met Ramsay long before he became her teacher at Flourish and Blotts -- he'd signed her copy of his cookbook, *Transfiguring Flavor*.

Arjuna headed up to bed before anyone else that night, even her friend and dormmate Astoria Greengrass, who had also auditioned. Arjuna knew Astoria would do well, but they both knew full well that they wouldn't go easy on each other. If nothing else, Arjuna had a suspicion what Astoria might want the 5000 Galleon prize money for...

'I could always give her some of the money, when I win,' Arjuna comforted herself. *'Papa doesn't need it; we've got more than enough.'*

When she reached the 4th year Ravenclaw girl's dorm, Arjuna closed the door behind her, sitting down on her neatly made bed and pulling out the top dresser drawer. She took out some candles and lit them one by one with the tip of her wand. Once the smell of jasmine fully permeated the room, she fetched the small crystal ball she'd bought in the Apothecary at Diagon Alley from her suitcase and sat down on her bed, cradling the ball in her hands and allowing her mind to go blank.

Arjuna loved the idea of Divination even before she attended Hogwarts. It had always seemed so ethereal and otherworldly. She'd really fallen in love with it, however, after starting the class last year with Professors Trelawney and Firenze. After telling her mother about it, she found out that there was actually some Seer blood in their veins, as Arjuna's great-grandmother had apparently been one. Arjuna sometimes laughed to Astoria that that was why she was so good at guessing the correct answers on pop quizzes.

After a moment of meditating and rocking the crystal ball back and forth in her hands, Arjuna placed it gently on the bedspread in front of her and gazed into it.

The mist in the crystal ball was moving -- was that an opening gate? A gate for opportunity...but what was in the gate? Triangular ears, a tail...was it a cat?

Arjuna squinted at the strange cat-like shape, confused. Cats, in scrying terms, tended to represent deceit...would someone cheat in the competition?

The cat scurried around a bottle, its tail trailing like smoke around it, before darting away in fear.

'A bottle...success, maybe?'

Arjuna considered the crystal ball carefully, her dark eyes running over the glass thoughtfully.

'Looks like someone will cheat in the competition...but the cheater will not win.'

Arjuna smiled wryly. That was fine by her -- she would certainly never cheat, after all.

'Guess all I have to do is figure out who's going to cheat,' she thought to herself. 'Logically speaking, it's likely to be a Gryffindor or a Slytherin -- they always are the most brutal, when they want to win something. And Hufflepuffs hate cheating, by and large.'

Astoria's face rippled through Arjuna's memory.

"Sorry, I follow things in the real world -- predicting things like that is just too wooly for my taste."

Arjuna bit her lip. She had to remember to be cautious with her interpretation -- even Professor Firenze personally saw all wizarding methods of fortune telling unreliable and only followed the stars. And she certainly *hoped* that no one would cheat in the competition...

Still turning her theory over in her head, Arjuna carefully put away her crystal ball and blew out the candles before tucking herself into bed.

The next morning she woke up bright and early, in time for Flitwick to post the names. Arjuna nodded politely to Flitwick and scanned the list. She smiled at the sight of her and Astoria's names on it.

'All right, then...who is a threat?' Arjuna thought to herself. ' Hannah Abbott...I hear she's pretty good...and so is Bridget Jaheem, her mother owns her own restaurant.'

A few other names on the list made her frown.

'Weasley's in the competition? Since when does he cook? Millicent Bulstrode...and Colin Creevey? How weird...'

Arjuna shrugged off her confusion.

'Well, Professor Ramsay wouldn't choose any slackers. If they can't keep up, they'll be weeded out quickly enough.'

She tossed her long black braid over her shoulder and headed back up the stairs toward the dorm with a satisfied smile. Even if she and Astoria were rivals, that didn't mean they couldn't talk about the competition.

Kevin

Kevin Whitby got to sleep very late the night after the audition. He'd been unable to get to sleep, as his brain had working at a mile a minute, so he kept himself busy with doing homework, playing with his toad Wallace, and finally writing a letter to his parents.

He settled down in bed, drawing the curtains and lighting up his wand so he could see the parchment propped up on a thick book in his lap. Nibbling on the edge of his Self-Inking quill for a minute, he then slowly started to write.

Hey Mum and Dad,

So I just had my audition today! Think I did all right. Professor Ramsay said my lemon ricotta biscuits were very tasty and tart, and he told me to tell Gran that he'd love to get her recipe! I figured that would make her happy.

Kevin paused. He wondered for a moment if he should say that Ramsay also warned him about how soft the cookies were, but decided against it. His parents would only want to hear good news - - no sense in worrying them...

There are a lot of really great student cooks competing! In my group, I saw Malcolm Preece, who's one of our Chasers, and these two Ravenclaw girls in my year, Astoria Greengrass and Arjuna Belaji, were also at the auditions. I've heard Arjuna has won blue ribbons for her cooking, so I'm sure she'll make it into the competition.

Everything is fine here at Hogwarts. Hufflepuff is really looking forward to the Quidditch season coming back on -- with our win against Ravenclaw in the fall, Hufflepuff is in the lead! I'm sure we'll win the Quidditch Cup for sure this year!

Once again Kevin decided not to mention that Hogsmeade trips were still cancelled thanks to what happened to Katie Bell. He just couldn't tell his parents about what had happened to her; he knew full well how scared they were about the War. They had to face the consequences of it every day, Mrs. Whitby hunting down Death Eaters with the rest of the Aurors and Mr. Whitby protecting Muggles with his fellow police officers. The very last thing they needed...was being scared for their son's sake.

Weather's lovely up here. The snow is perfectly white and fluffy -- just like the sort we used to see on holiday, at our old cabin. It reminds me of the big fires we'd put in the fireplace, the mince pies we'd bake, and the ghost stories we'd tell at night...

'Back then, it was fun to be scared,' Kevin thought to himself. Memories of the three of them laughing and screaming together rippled over his mind. 'Back then...there wasn't really anything to be afraid of...no Death Eaters, no Dark Lord...no...danger...'

Plop.

A big spot of ink landed on the parchment. It snapped Kevin back down to earth. He couldn't undo the mistake, so he simply ignored it.

Miss you both so much! I'll try to get your birthday cake done a little early this year, Dad, so you can bring it into the office! How about a three layer German chocolate cake with caramel and almond shavings?

Love from

Kevin

Kevin finally dozed off in the wee hours of the morning. It wasn't until his best friends, Brendan Halkirk and Katsuji Yamazaki, burst into the room and ripped his bed curtains open that he shot awake.

"Kevin!" Brendan hollered excitedly. "Kevin, mate, you did it! You made it!"

"Wha -- huh?"

Kevin was still half-asleep.

"You made it into the top 12!" Katsuji said more calmly, though his smile was just as big.

Kevin rubbed his eyes. "Top 12...what?"

Then his brain caught up. He bolted upright.

"...I made it into the contest!?"

"Uh, *yeah!*" laughed Brendan. "Merlin, only had to tell you *three times* for you to get it...come on, get dressed and go look for yourself!"

"Go on ahead," Kevin said quickly. "I'll be right behind you!"

Brendan and Katsuji left the room and started up the stairs. Kevin snatched up his letter to his parents and scribbled a postscript in messy, oversized letters.

P.S. I MADE IT INTO THE TOP 12! Wish me luck!!

Millicent

Millicent Bulstrode slept in as long as she could the night after the auditions. Everyone's reactions to her auditioning had been negative enough that she figured it would be better to feign indifference if she made it in, rather than get excited. And she had a nagging feeling that she'd done pretty well -- the look in Ramsay's eye when he'd first tasted her pistachio rose macarons had been enough to make her smile despite herself.

Millicent honestly wasn't sure if this had been a good idea. She had a very definitive reputation at school -- that of the "tough girl" -- and that would definitely be jeopardized by her putting on a chef's apron. But everyone had been going on and on about Slytherin losing the House Cup because Draco dropped off the Quidditch team, and Millicent finally just got sick enough of it that she decided to try to earn those points back herself. It was definitely not because she actually *liked* cooking, she'd told everyone -- of course not.

The night after the auditions, Millicent sat alone by the fire in the middle of the Slytherin common room, doing her Defense Against the Dark Arts homework. She ignored her dormmates -- Daphne Greengrass, Pansy Parkinson, and Tracey Davis -- as they headed up to bed. At one point a younger Slytherin boy from the auditions looked as if he was considering sitting by the fire too, but when he caught Millicent's eye and was victim to her cold, quietly aggressive stare, he quickly headed upstairs instead.

She waited until the common room was completely deserted. Then, in a hushed, but very clear voice, she spoke into the empty room.

"Winky, please come here."

Crack.

In an instant, a tiny house elf with long eyelashes, a mop of black hair, and very big watery eyes appeared in the Slytherin commonroom.

"You called, Miss Millicent?" squeaked the elf called Winky.

Millicent's eyes softened significantly upon the elf.

"Yes, I did," she said. "I wanted to thank you for your help at the audition today."

Winky blinked in surprise.

"Oh, but Miss Millicent," she squeaked, "Winky only did was what Master Gordon told her to do!"

"Yes, but you were still very helpful," Millicent replied patiently, "and I'm positive no one else thanked you lot for your good work, so thank you."

Still faintly bemused, Winky nonetheless smiled slightly.

"Oh...well...you're very welcome, Miss Millicent!"

Millicent didn't smile, per say, but her black eyes were quite soft. "That was all. I'll let you get back to work."

Winky nodded and, with a new little bounce to her step, she disappeared with another *crack*.

House elves were generally seen as second-class citizens in the Wizarding World. They were almost exclusively servants of old wizard families and frequently were given little respect in the eyes of the Ministry. Although they were incredibly powerful magical beings, they were often treated as lesser creatures in comparison to wizards.

Millicent had felt a lot of compassion for magical Beings -- that is, house elves, centaurs, werewolves, vampires, and hags -- for a long time. She'd even been largely raised by the Bulstrode family house elf, Lowry, since her parents were so often busy with their legal practice. After the First Wizarding War, they'd been very hard at work dealing with the aftermath, especially since so many of their friends had had... "*unsavory*" allegations swirling around them. That had resulted in Millicent largely raising herself, with help from Lowry the elf. Lowry was unusually spunky for an elf and would covertly sidestep Mr. and Mrs. Bulstrode's strict rules to take Millicent to London and Diagon Alley while they were at work. When Millicent got to Hogwarts, she actively took an interest in house elf history, and that expanded into centaur culture and history upon meeting Professor Firenze through Divination class. She was sure to keep her liberal stance quiet around her parents, however, for they would definitely not take kindly to it; even at Hogwarts, she tried not to make her stance common knowledge, since more than a few of her classmates' parents were friends with her parents and Millicent had little interest in being the butt of anyone's jokes.

Millicent put her finished homework and textbook away in her schoolbag and then quickly headed up the stairs to bed. All of the other girls were sleeping, though Daphne was resting fitfully. Shuffling into bed, Millicent pulled the curtains shut and brought the covers over her so that her feet stuck out at the bottom. She tended to kick in her sleep, and having her feet constrained gave her bad dreams.

When she woke up the next morning, Millicent went downstairs to find the common room bustling. Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass moved past her down the stairs. Tracey Davis, her other roommate, went over and greeted Daphne as Pansy darted off, presumably to look for Draco. Daphne looked at the board, her expression lightly smug as she headed back up toward their dorm; on her way, she gave Millicent a clipped nod.

"Congratulations, Millicent," she said formally.

Millicent tried to look offhand. "...Made it then, did I?"

"Yes," said Daphne. Her brown eyes ran over Millicent critically. "I'm surprised you went out for it."

Millicent shrugged, not making eye contact with Daphne. Feeling more awkward than she would care to admit, she strolled quickly past Daphne to look at the board herself.

There her name was, right between Bridget Jaheem's and Daphne's. Looks like Potter's friend Weasley was competing too...and Hannah Abbott.

'This is going to be interesting,' Millicent thought to herself dully. *'Very interesting...'*

Cho

Cho Chang slept intermittently the night after the audition, as per usual. She hadn't had a full night's sleep where she hadn't had to wake up at least once in a very long time...not since...

Cho had barely kept it together when she presented her cookies to Ramsay. She hadn't made her white-chocolate-dipped gingersnap biscuits since Cedric was alive, and even just smelling them had brought all the memories back. Ramsay had been very kind when he tasted them, praising her on her flavors and saying that he could tell her heart had really been in her biscuits, so that had helped somewhat.

When Cho woke up the first time that night, it was because of her usual dream. She'd always be flying, at the start. People would be flying around her as if she were in a Quidditch match, except no one's faces would be very clear and she'd never see anyone actually carrying the Quaffle or scoring goals. She'd be trying to catch the Snitch, which was constantly just out of reach. Then, just as she was about to catch it, the Snitch would be gone...and Cedric would be there in its place, reaching a hand out to her. And as soon as she'd grab his hand...

That was always the worst part.

In an instant, Cedric's smiling face would go pale and lifeless, his eyes staring blankly right through her and his shirt covered in dirt. He would look just like he had when Harry brought back his body – after You-Know-Who had murdered him –

Cho would always try to pull away, but Cedric's grip tightened around her, and suddenly she'd be pulled downward – down, down, down – with their brooms flying out of their hands and the darkness inhaling them –

Cho would always force herself awake before the acid green Dark Mark appeared out of the black void and swallowed them both whole. If she'd stayed asleep long enough to see that, she would always invariably be shaking in uncontrollable terror when she woke up.

Logically, Cho knew that people had gone through a lot worse than she had. Her ex-boyfriend Harry had actually *seen* Cedric die. She'd talked to Viktor Krum and Fleur Delacour after the Tournament, and both of them had felt survivor's guilt – Krum especially, as Barty Crouch, Jr. had used the Imperius Curse on him to try to “take out” Harry's competition (Fleur and Cedric) so that only Harry would've taken the Triwizard Cup and gone to the graveyard.

“Part of me wishes...that I’d been able to Stun Cedric, too...like I did with Fleur,” Krum had told her lowly. “But then the other part of me is so, *so* relieved that Harry stopped me, before I hurt him too.”

Both he and Fleur had had nothing but nice things to say about Cedric. Fleur had even brought her arms around Cho to comfort her when she’d started to cry.

Cho adjusted herself in bed, placing her hands under her head as she stared up at the top of her four-posted bed and at the sapphire blue hangings set up around it.

She’d cried a lot in the year after Cedric’s death. It was one of the main tension points between her and Harry, before they broke up – Harry wanted to forget what had happened, and Cho didn’t. Cedric meant enough to Cho that she couldn’t just *not know* what had happened, even if the knowledge hurt; she had to know what had happened, in order for it to be real. She had to know what had happened, in order for her to heal. And, she considered to herself as she stared up at the top of her bed...perhaps she had not realized that because Harry already *did* know what had happened and was traumatized by it...he *didn’t* really understand her needs as well as she’d thought he might, since he had been mourning Cedric like she was. And in retrospect, she really didn’t blame him for that. After all, he’d only known Cedric for two years. She’d known Cedric almost her entire life.

They’d met at a Ministry Christmas function. They both were only children of Ministry employees and had been dragged along by their parents, and being the only two children there, they had immediately run off to play. They snatched food from the potluck table and hid behind the long curtains draped around the enchanted windows, chatting about Quidditch for hours. From then on, play dates were scheduled...and young love blossomed.

Cho, being the logical one of the two of them, had not called it love, at the start. Even back then, she knew they were just children – love was something *adults* did, so what they had had to be just a crush. But Cedric had known. He’d been wiser than her, even though she was in Ravenclaw and he was in Hufflepuff. So when he asked her on their first real date in her third year, Cho had tried putting on the brakes – what if it ruined their friendship forever?

Cedric had laughed that off effortlessly.

“Cho...you know me better than anyone in the world,” he had said to her, grinning from ear to ear. “Do you think you could ever bring yourself to hate me?”

And once she thought, she realized...no. Nothing Cedric could ever do – nothing he *would* ever do

– could ever make her stop caring about him. And she didn't even need to answer out loud, for Cedric knew her just as well as she knew him, and had already known what her response would be.

So their romance began. It honestly wasn't much different from their friendship, except that Cedric was more open with his hugs and they kissed on a regular basis. They still talked about Quidditch; they still talked about their goal to play on the same professional Quidditch team after school; they still played Gobstones; Cedric still made Cho laugh with his corny jokes; Cho still cooked for him over the winter holidays. The only difference there was that when she was cooking, Cho would sometimes imagine cooking for Cedric in their *own* house – in their *own* kitchen – as husband and wife.

By the time sixth year rolled around and Cedric entered the Triwizard competition, they'd been dating for three years. Cho had been hoping that after school, Cedric would formally propose to her. Maybe he'd even been planning to do so after winning the Triwizard Tournament, she thought to herself. The prize money for that competition would've more than covered the price of a new house in Wandsworth Green...just like Cho had always dreamed...

Cho turned over in bed, rubbing her eyes tiredly, and then reached under her bed. Her hand reached around for a minute, before finding her sketchbook. She flipped through the pages until she found the one she was looking for.

The prize money...that was this had all come down to. She had a chance to win this competition now – one that suited her talents. She knew Cedric would not have wanted her to pass it up, just as she hadn't wanted him to pass up the Triwizard Tournament, when he wanted to do it so badly. But there was no point in buying that house in Wandsworth Green anymore. Cho's old dream wouldn't be complete, if she bought it now. All she wanted now...was to make sure that *no one* forgot about Cedric.

Her sketch was of a full, life-size statue of Cedric, with tiny writing written in cursive around the base: *"Remember Cedric Diggory."*

She'd originally sent a copy of her drawing to Mr. Diggory that Christmas, asking if he'd be all right with her wanting to commission one just like it to be placed at Hogwarts, if she won the competition. The next day Mr. Diggory had sent back a letter soaked with tears.

"There is no other home more deserving of such an honor," the letter had said. *"I couldn't be more proud of you, and I know Cedric would be as well, were he here."*

Cho ran her hand over her sketch, her black eyes dark with sorrow. Then she very gently put the

sketchbook away and tried to fall back to sleep. Her next cluster of dreams she barely remembered when she woke up...but they were much more peaceful than any she'd had in a long time...and she could've sworn she'd heard Cedric's voice in most of them.

When she woke up the second time, Cho decided to head downstairs to check the notice board. Her friend Marietta Edgecombe came with her. The terrible blisters Harry's friend Hermione Granger had cursed onto her face were still as insanely red as ever, but Cho barely saw them anymore – her best friend's eyes and smile were infinitely more important.

A crowd had already formed around the notice board. When some of them noticed Cho, they started cheering and chattering excitedly.

"Congratulations, Cho!" said her yearmate Eddie Carmichael. "You made it!"

Cho gawked. Marietta grabbed onto her friend's shoulder, shaking her excitedly.

"I *knew* you'd make it!" she said brightly.

"Most of your competition's in Hufflepuff," said Carmichael smugly, "so you've got this in the bag – they might be pleasant chaps, but they don't know fine dining –"

"Eddie," Cho said in a cool, quelling tone, "kindly zip your lips so that I don't feel the urge to *hex* them shut."

Carmichael took her at her word, leaving with his hands up by his head in halfhearted surrender. Marietta rolled her eyes, but turned to Cho with a fierce pride in her eyes.

"That idiot is right about one thing, Cho – you've got this, no question."

Cho smiled at her best friend...and for a moment, she could almost imagine Cedric standing right behind Marietta, smiling just as proudly.

Colin

Colin Creevey got to sleep on time the night after the audition, but woke up in the wee hours of the morning feeling wide awake, like a child anticipating Christmas morning.

Feeling restless, Colin strolled down to the abandoned Gryffindor common room and found a spot in one of the comfy chairs set up in front of the fire. He stared into the flames, watching them lick at the darkened firewood and listening to their melodic crackles.

It was too bad that he couldn't use the Floo Network to contact his dad. Sure, it was early, but Mr. Creevey's route as a milkman always got him up bright and early, so no doubt he'd already be awake. Sadly Mr. Creevey was a Muggle, so his house would not be linked to the Floo Network, and he'd probably have a heart attack seeing his son's disembodied head in the fireplace.

Colin and his brother Dennis were both very close to their dad – how could they *not* be, when he was all the two boys had? Their mom had left the three of them when Dennis was just a baby – Colin barely remembered her now, but frankly, he didn't *want* to remember her, considering how badly she had hurt their dad. He'd tried dating again, after she left...but Colin saw all of those relationships break off one by one, largely thanks to how much trouble his dad had trusting anyone with his heart again. It seemed sometimes like the only people Mr. Creevey trusted unconditionally were his sons.

Colin looked out the window. He supposed he could always write his dad a letter and send it by Owl Post...but he'd had to keep them to a minimum, since the Creeveys lived in a very nosy neighborhood and any owls that flocked around their house tended to draw a lot of unnecessary attention. And Colin and Dennis had brought their dad *enough* negative attention over the years, with their little outbursts of what they had not known at the time was magic.

One time Dennis had made an entire trail of flowers sprout up between him and the girl he had a crush on. Another time, when a bully had broken Colin's camera, Colin had accidentally Transfigured a beehive that had been hanging in a tree overhead onto the bully's head, and he had been sent to the hospital with hundreds of bee stings covering his face. The two brothers even almost got expelled once when Colin accidentally hexed his brother's teacher after seeing her use corporal punishment on him in front of her class – he'd tried over and over to explain that he had only shouted at the teacher, and *not* shoved her into the blackboard. He'd never even *touched* her! And even if he had, there was no way he'd be that strong – she'd been thrown into the blackboard with so much force that the blackboard had shattered into a hundred pieces!

Mr. Creevey had had no better explanation for all of the trouble his sons got into than they did... but he still loved them unconditionally. Many people over the years labeled his behavior as coddling, saying he had been protecting two delinquents who needed correction, but he refused to

see it that way. Perhaps he'd been a bit starry-eyed about his two sons, Colin thought to himself – but he had been right. When Professor McGonagall arrived and explained what was really going on, it was the answer that all three of them had wanted to know for years. And after Colin received his Hogwarts letter and learned that he would be going to a school where he could learn to control his weird powers, Colin had made a promise to himself. From that day forward, Colin and Dennis would *never* embarrass Mr. Creevey again. Mr. Creevey would be proud of them and their accomplishments, and the Creevey name would earn esteem across this amazing new world they'd found themselves a part of...the Wizarding World.

And so during every holiday break, Colin showed his dad all of the pictures he took at school – the good, the bad, the embarrassing, and the funny – and told him about everything that he'd been unable to send a letter about. And every year, his dad would always say the same thing – everything was just so “*magical*.”

Colin noticed a copy of the *Daily Prophet* abandoned on one of the side tables. He inched himself out of the armchair, snatched it up, and then sat back down, opening it up and reading the articles.

‘Two more Muggles found dead in Liverpool,’ Colin thought to himself grimly. *‘It looks like the Death Eaters are traveling through the north of England...I wonder if You-Know-Who is trying to taunt Dumbledore, by moving closer and closer to Hogwarts every month. Everyone knows he’s more scared of Dumbledore than anyone...’*

The thought made Colin’s eyes narrow and his heart blaze with determination.

‘Well...when I’m out of school, I’ll join the Order of the Phoenix, and I’ll make sure the Death Eaters never reach Hogwarts!’ he thought. If Hogwarts fell...well, then what would happen to all of the young Muggle-borns? Where would they be? Dennis and he had been able to start making something of themselves here at Hogwarts – would those new Muggle-born students never find anywhere to go, if Hogwarts didn’t exist?

Colin flipped through the rest of the paper. Finding the crossword, he put his hand on an abandoned quill on one of the tables and started to fill it out.

He couldn’t do anything until he was of age, naturally. Dumbledore wouldn’t let him enlist at only fifteen. So in the meantime, all Colin could do was focus on the rest of his life...as well as he was able.

One of the clues was “*The head chef of Hell’s Kitchen.*” That made Colin grin broadly as he scribbled in the answer.

How proud would his dad be, when he won the contest! How amazing would it be for his dad, meeting the best wizard chef in the country and visiting one of the best wizard-owned restaurants in the world! He could hear his dad now: “Oh – it’s just so...*magical!*”

When the sun rose several hours later, Colin had finished the crossword and started writing several letters to the *Daily Prophet*’s editor regarding various articles. (Some of the mistakes were simply grammar-oriented, but others...Merlin’s beard! Colin wondered if anyone *fact-checked* things at the paper, sometimes.)

Colin was the first one to see Professor McGonagall arrive in the common room with the list of names. He shot to his feet, staring at her avidly as she went over to the board to post it.

“Did I make it?” he burst out before he could stop himself.

McGonagall glanced at him a bit reproachfully, and Colin winced. She then stepped back and let him dart over to read the names.

Colin found the Gryffindor heading...and there it was! His name! Right above Ron Weasley’s!

“I took the liberty of sending your father a letter through the Muggle Post,” McGonagall said, and her lips curled up in a small, proud smile. “He should be receiving it in the next two days.”

Colin looked up at her, his eyes and smile over-bright.

“...Thank you, Professor!”

McGonagall inclined her head in a small nod and swept out of the room.

Astoria

Astoria Greengrass slept fitfully the night after the auditions. Regardless of how well the audition had gone, Astoria herself had not been pleased with the finished result. Cookies and sweets had never *exactly* been her strong point – she herself had always disliked very sugary foods and tended to gravitate toward more fruity or savory flavors. Even when she and her sister were little, Daphne's favorite sweet was Chocolate Frogs – Astoria's was Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans.

Still, Astoria had known she should try to appeal to what *most* people would prefer, so as to have a better certainty that she'd appeal to Ramsay's taste buds, and that would mean making a sugary biscuit. So instead of making a mince pie, like the sort she'd make for her Uncle Hyperion, or her personal favorite, cheesy thumbprint biscuits with Tomato Bourbon Jam, she chose an extra hard recipe for vanilla and chocolate Napoleon-inspired biscuits. She'd picked it not just because of the sweeter flavors, but because Napoleons are one of the hardest desserts anyone can get right in their usual form, let alone as a biscuit.

Alas, a half hour was precious time, and in the end, her biscuits had not turned out perfectly – Ramsay cited that they were too crispy around the edges and that the chocolate faintly overpowered the vanilla. He still seemed to enjoy them, but Astoria was putout. Despite his praise, she *knew* she could've done better...and if there was anything Astoria was, it was her own worst critic.

When she returned back to the Ravenclaw commonroom that evening, she found an armchair by the window and settled down into it comfortably. Her friend Arjuna Belaji, who had been with her at the audition and had gotten great praise for her Nan Khatai biscuits, headed up to bed first, and Astoria gave her a smile and a small wave as she left up the stairs. Astoria then took out her Muggle Studies homework and book from her bag and started writing her essay on Muggle transportation.

Just as she was finishing up her paragraph about the London Tube, she suddenly became aware of a commotion just outside the Ravenclaw commonroom. It was loud enough that it got the attention of the other Ravenclaws studying in the room. It almost sounded like a *fight*, but...no, there was too much *cheering* for that...

The other students went to go check and Astoria hustled after them, trying to make her way through the crowd. When they reached the entrance of the portrait hole and Astoria pushed her way to the front, she was horrified by what she saw.

One of the Ravenclaw upperclassmen – a perfect prat of a seventh year named Eddie Carmichael – had strung a Slytherin first year up to one of the chandeliers by the back of his robes and was now hexing those same robes to flash Ravenclaw colors like a light-up neon sign, to the cheers of the

entire crowd. The poor Slytherin boy looked terrified but was trying desperately not to cry as he faced down his tormentors.

The students who had come out of the commonroom with Astoria merely stood around looking baffled. Astoria, on the other hand, strode forward furiously, whipping her wand out in a single dramatic gesture.

“*Expelliarmus!*”

Eddie Carmichael’s wand abruptly shot out of his hand and went soaring up into the air. The entire crowd watched the wand spiral around once in mid-air before landing in Astoria’s outstretched hand. Astoria then barreled over to Carmichael, her light blue eyes flashing at him as she stood protectively in front of the first year Slytherin boy.

“What are you playing at!?” she demanded.

“That...that kid was trying to sneak into Ravenclaw Tower,” Carmichael explained, a little taken aback by her ferocity but standing his ground. “He had this stuff with him – ”

He held out a pot of Peruvian Instant Darkness Power and a bottle of green spray paint.

“He was going to vandalize the commonroom,” Carmichael said, his hazel eyes flashing at the Slytherin boy behind Astoria in righteous fury. “I just figured we’d send him back to the Snakes with some *tagging* of our own – ”

“Two wrongs do *not* make a right, Eddie Carmichael,” Astoria snapped back. “Regardless of what he was trying to do, we are *above* bullying! Or at least, *I* am – I frankly don’t know or care how *you* sleep at night!”

Carmichael’s eyes narrowed. “Chill out, Greengrass – we weren’t *hurting* the kid.”

“You don’t know the definition of ‘*hurt*,’ then,” Astoria said coldly. “It takes more than just physical wounds.”

She turned around to face the boy. His eyes were still full of tears he was trying desperately to choke back, and he stared at her in a watery mixture of confusion and disbelief. Astoria spared him a small, reassuring smile, before levitating him off the chandelier and back down to the ground. She then disenchanting his clothes, removing the flashing Ravenclaw colors, and helped the boy pull his robes back on, since they'd partially come off in the mayhem.

"I want you to go back to your commonroom," she told the boy quietly, her eyes gentle but her tone very stern, "and if someone dared you to do this, I want you to tell them that Astoria Greengrass says grow a backbone and do the stupid prank yourself. Got it?"

The little Slytherin boy nodded silently. Then, his eyes still warily watching the other Ravenclaws, he dashed away as fast as he could.

Astoria flashed one more menacing look at Carmichael, before sweeping back into the commonroom to finish her homework. She wanted to finish all of the work she had for the week so far before the night was over, so she knew she had to get cracking.

Astoria was something of an oddity in the house of Ravenclaw. Whereas many Ravenclaws thought with their heads primarily, Astoria was a rather emotional person. It was something she had in common with her sister Daphne, even though Daphne had always obscured it from the world at large, just as their parents did and instructed them to do also. But Astoria, who had always been the black sheep of the family, disliked the Greengrass protocol demanding that they hide their intentions and feelings from the world. It seemed to her that in a world like the one they were in, people were often too stupid to look past the surface...and so it was prudent to make your emotions clear. That didn't mean one had to be completely open about everything, of course – Astoria certainly hid away any insecurities or fears she had – but she didn't feel the need to stand back and let people just take care of themselves. Uncle Hyperion certainly never felt the urge to do so.

Hyperion Carrow, who was one of Astoria's mother Theia's older brothers, was also a "black sheep" of the family. He'd been a Slytherin through and through, but he also had something of a rebellious streak. He loved taking risks and learning new things, and at Hogwarts had achieved the rare feat of earning 11 Outstanding OWLS, so he had been a tutor for most of his nieces and nephews before they attended Hogwarts. Astoria *adored* her uncle – her favorite time of every day had been when Hyperion would tutor her and Daphne, teaching them the history behind the creation of Hogwarts, instructing them on the proper way to hold one's wand so that it would be harder for someone to disarm you, and showing them how to collect frog spawn in nearby ponds. In retrospect, Astoria thought to herself that it was likely thanks to Uncle Hyperion that she'd grown such a love for books and study – and that love of academics placed her where she was now, rather than in Slytherin house with Daphne.

Daphne, her older sister, had always taken more after their parents. When Astoria had popped out a Ravenclaw, Daphne had quickly withdrawn from her sister, just as her parents had. Astoria knew

that it was likely Daphne thought she had to follow the self-absorbed principles their parents had taught them and simply look after herself...but that didn't mean the rejection hadn't hurt. The last few years had been very hard for Astoria at home – so much so that she'd actively tried to stay at Hogwarts as much as she possibly could. She just couldn't deal with slinking around like a stray cat, trying not to listen as their parents discussed the state of the War with a measure of satisfaction rather than fear or horror.

Astoria could see which way the wind was blowing. Things were getting worse...so she knew she *had* to get out of her parents' house as soon as possible. When the hurricane arrived, she knew staying in that house would be tantamount to condemning herself to a life in Azkaban – locked in a home that would no doubt be a gathering place for Death Eaters and pureblood-supremacists. And that was something Astoria's soft, noble heart could not stand the thought of. It would be difficult living on her own at fourteen...but she knew deep down there was no other option. And she could always contact Professor McGonagall and ask to access the fund set up for impoverished students for her school supplies, so she could be prepared for her OWLS next year. She'd have to get top marks to become a Healer, after all...

When Astoria finished her homework a few hours later, she trudged up to bed and tried to will herself to sleep, even though her brain was working at a mile a minute.

5000 Galleons...a tenth of that would cover the down payment on an apartment, and then the rest could likely cover her rent for the next eight months...maybe a year, if she took a part-time job over the summer...and if she applied for some Ministry scholarships, then she'd probably be able to stretch that to about two years...maybe even until she was legal age, and could get a better-paying job, maybe at St. Mungo's...

Even when she did fall asleep, these thoughts kept whirling in her head and prevented her from sleeping peacefully.

When she woke up the next morning, she showered, brushed her hair, and slipped on her robes in under ten minutes. Just as she was getting ready to head downstairs, Arjuna came upstairs to meet her. She came up behind her, squeezing her in a hug from behind.

"Guess what?" Arjuna said in a singsong voice, her smile broad and toothy. "Someone made it into the contest with me..."

Astoria gave her friend's reflection in the mirror a sardonic smile.

"Was it Eddie Carmichael?" she asked innocently.

Arjuna stuck her tongue out at Astoria. “No! It’s *you*, silly!”

Astoria chuckled quietly. “I know, I know...”

Then the information fully kicked in. She turned to look at Arjuna, her mouth spreading into a wide smile.

“...So we both made it.”

“Yep,” Arjuna said brightly. “You, me, and Cho Chang, for Ravenclaw...though, with all due respect to her, I don’t think she’ll be much competition...”

“Being good at flying and good at cooking don’t have to be mutually exclusive things, R.J.,” Astoria said warningly. “R.J.” was Astoria’s nickname for Arjuna – she’d always nicknamed her friends, ever since she was little. Daphne had been “Fifi,” way back when.

“Just in your case, then?” teased Arjuna.

Astoria gave Arjuna a pointed shove, and Arjuna laughed. Astoria was notoriously awful at flying. She hated heights, and in first year, the broom had *refused* to jump up into her hand, no matter how hard she tried. When she actually tried getting into the air, she had flown around in chaotic spirals and had been taken to the Hospital Wing after her head collided with a tree branch and she was knocked unconscious.

Arjuna looped her arm around Astoria’s, yanking her down the stairs. “Come on – I have some recipes I want to run by you...and I want to know what you’re thinking too – I promise I won’t steal any of your ideas!”

Astoria smirked. “If you did, you’d only help me show off that I can do it better.”

“In your dreams!”

Owen

Owen slept like a rock the night after the auditions. Once he was asleep, there was never anything in the wide world that could ever wake him. His dormmates liked to joke that even an earthquake wouldn't be enough to stir Owen out of a sound sleep.

Admittedly Owen's audition had gone rather well, as far as he was concerned. Sure, his alfajores biscuits with dulce de leche may not have been as pretty as a lot of his competition, but Ramsay had enjoyed his flavors and had been impressed by his knowledge of South American recipes. Owen had originally thought of making his grandmother's oatmeal raisin, but after thinking it over, he decided that for a competition like this, he'd have to either go big or go home. So he'd rustled through the old compendium of recipes his dad had put together when he was in the Navy traveling overseas and settled on the caramel sandwich biscuits from Argentina that his dad had called alfajores.

Owen had always been a rather laid-back kid with a love of creature comforts, but when he wanted something, he was always the sort to put in the work needed to come out ahead of his competition. Back home in the magical community of Salazar's Grove, he'd been a Hippogriff Scout from the time he was four years old, going camping in magical forests and capturing billywigs so that the troop could make their own handmade Fizzing Whizbees out of their stingers and freshly churned ice cream. His Hippogriff Scout Troop had been a second family for him while his mother was working at the office during the day, and Owen had always loved bringing all of the fun things he'd learned home to her every afternoon when she got home and they and Owen's grandmother, Grandma Trudy, all made dinner together.

Nowadays Owen had an eye on slightly more adventurous pursuits. When he'd heard about the MagicChef contest, his mind raced with the possibility -- not only would there be so many delicious things he, his mom, and his grandmother could try together at Hell's Kitchen, but with the prize money, the three of them could travel all over, sampling all sorts of multi-cultural cuisine! They could try all the amazing food his dad had wrote about and see all the amazing things he'd seen. Owen knew how much that would mean to his mom...and it'd mean an awful lot to him, too.

Owen said goodnight to his upperclassmen friends from the Gobstones Club, Tamsin Applebee, Gregory Munslow, and Malcolm Preece, in the commonroom and then to his best friend, Eleanor Bradstone, at the stairs separating the girls' and boys' dorms. He then tucked himself into bed, smiling widely.

He knew today had gone well. Soon, maybe, he'd be in the contest, and he could get to work getting that money for that amazing world tour he'd always dreamed about.

'First, we'll go to Paris, France,' he thought firmly. 'The chef's capitol of the world! We'll tour the Louvre, and Notre Dame, and of course stop by the Paris Opera House for a live show, before stopping by for a meal at the Cockatrice Cellier hidden underneath it...

'Next...Italy! We'll visit the La Befana monument outside the Sicilian Ministry, visit the canals...and try fresh pasta at the best restaurants in town! We'll have to get an enchanted Venetian mask to bring home too, for Grandma to hang in her room!

'Next Greece, and then a train into Istanbul! We can explore the bazaars of Djinnulah, and buy dragon fangs that never lose their fire breath shine! Then we can take a bus into the heart of Africa, and search for wild erumpents in the Nigerian savannah!

'Oh right, and Egypt! We can explore the cursed ruins of Luxor with a real curse-breaker, and maybe we'll see a real sphinx! Then I'll be able to solve one of its riddles...if I can! And if I can't...I'll have to run for my life! Merlin, that'll be a story to tell!

'Then we can ride a magic carpet across the Middle East, into Saudi Arabia and through India...we can see the Taj Mahal and meet Dev Khamun, the youngest professional Seeker in the world! We'll have to make sure we try all of the best restaurants too...maybe we can even visit a hookah lounge!

'And Japan! Oh man, we could spend weeks there – hunting down kappas and exploring old shrines...and imagine all the fresh seafood! All the amazing sushi! And the cherry blossoms!

'And then...Australia! We can visit the Opera House, and go to the Australian Ministry's headquarters in the Nullarbor Plain! I wonder if any of the officers positioned in Sydney would still remember Dad...?

'The United States we'd probably have to spend at least a week on – New York City and Los Angeles alone would probably take two days each...and Salem we could probably take three, with all of their witch hunting history! And we could search for thunderbirds in the midwestern plains...!'

His thoughts went on and on like this. The thirteen-year-old was way too deep in his dreaming to even consider that there was no way he could pay for everything he'd thought of doing with 5000 Galleons...but the possibility alone was thrilling. The doors that such a prize opened made Owen's heart race.

When Owen woke up the next morning, he leapt out of bed and dashed upstairs to go check the schedule. On his way up, he ran right into a tiny girl with brown hair dashing out from the second year girl's dorm.

"Ow!" said Owen. "Watch where you're going!"

The girl, however, had barely stopped. Still running down, she merely shot a bemused look back at him.

"I am!" she said coolly, showing off the gaps between her teeth when she spoke. "Maybe if *you* were watching where I was going too, you wouldn't have run into me!"

Owen stared after her, shaking his head once in bewilderment. Then, grumbling to himself about how weird girls were, he ran up the rest of the stairs.

When he came up, all of the Hufflepuffs were gathered around the notice board, talking to each other excitedly. Owen saw the obnoxious second year girl reach the board, and upon reading it, she screamed, "*I MADE IT! I MADE IT!*" A few of the upperclassmen, including the sixth year prefect Ernie Macmillan, congratulated the small girl.

His heart beating with anticipation, Owen bustled forward so he could look at the board himself. As he read the names, he suddenly became aware of someone standing just over him reading the board too. The person must have seen his name as soon as he did, for as soon as Owen's face burst out into a huge grin at the sight of it, the person hugged him from behind, squeezing him tight.

"Owen, you made it!" said a voice Owen recognized as Tamsin.

"Good on you, Owen," said Malcolm, who put forward a bit of a sad smile. "Wish I'd made it too."

Owen grinned at the two of them and Gregory, who was also smiling proudly. "Thanks, you guys..."

Owen noticed Eleanor coming up the stairs. She caught his eye, looking almost questioningly – he beamed from ear to ear at her, putting both thumbs in the air, and her expression lit up. She dashed over, pushing through the crowd, and gave him a big hug.

"Congratulations, Owen!" she said, and for once her quiet voice was shaking with a measure of excitable volume. "Oh, your mum is going to be so proud of you!"

Owen's black eyes softened. "Yeah..."

His eyes then lit up with a thought. "You reckon I could send her a Howler, just so she can hear how excited I am?"

Eleanor gave him a reproachful smile.

“Receiving a Howler would probably scare your mother half to death,” she said levelly, her voice returning to its usual restrained pitch. “I think a letter will do quite nicely.”

“Okay, okay,” laughed Owen.

Rose

Rose Zeller stayed up all night like a sugar-high child – which, honestly, she was. Her audition had gone so well that she'd eaten four whole Fizzing Whizbees afterwards.

Rose had taken a gamble with her entry – she'd seen these "stained glass" biscuits in a Christmas catalogue at the supermarket over the holidays and spontaneously decided that she wanted to try making them all by herself for the very first time at the audition. She used stencils to cut star shapes out of her round sugar biscuits and then poured a boiling hot sugar, water, corn syrup, orange extract, and food coloring mixture in each of the cutouts. To her excitement, when the biscuits were done cooking, they turned out perfectly, with the colorful center hardening like rock candy in the center of her soft, sweet sugar biscuits.

When Ramsay first bit into it, he chewed it slowly, giving Rose the longest look.

"...Remind everyone, darling," he had said, "how old you are? 15? 14?"

Rose had grinned from ear to ear. "...12, sir."

"Absolutely brilliant."

Those words echoed in Rose's head all day afterwards. She even crowed it a few time to herself, just to help it sink in.

"Absolutely brilliant!" she cheered, disregarding the confused looks she was attracting.
"Absolutely brilliant!"

Rose immediately wrote a letter to her mom and stepdad back home in Bristol with the collection of multi-colored gel pens she'd smuggled in. She always preferred writing with different colors and as much as school had forced her to write with a quill during class, she still preferred writing with pens. It was just what she was used to...even though her stepfather George was a wizard, she'd been largely raised in the Muggle world and so knew it best.

Her mother, Catherine, and George Ketteridge had met quite by chance. Rose had unknowingly cast magic when she and Catherine were out shopping and had made every cookie box on the

shelves levitate up toward the ceiling. George had initiated a conversation with Catherine when the strange incident was over, and the next week they went on their first date. They'd been dating for almost two years when Rose got her letter to Hogwarts, and George revealed to Catherine that he, in fact, was a wizard too. He actually was one of the Ministry employees who had modified some of the memories of the Muggles who witnessed Rose's outburst. George said he'd merely wanted to make sure that Rose and Catherine were all right, since the magical episode had left Catherine shaken and confused, but before he knew it, he'd fallen hard and fast for Catherine and never looked back.

George taught Rose and her mother everything he could about the Wizarding World. He brought them to the Ministry, introduced them to all of his coworkers in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, gave them an in-depth tour of Diagon Alley, and taught Rose how to use the Floo Network both to travel and to communicate. It seemed to Rose that George had been both thrilled and relieved to share his world with them – like having to hide everything he was from them had been burdening him for years and he was so happy to finally share his secret with them. Rose sort of knew how he felt – whenever she visited her father, Patrick Zeller, it was hard not to tell him about what was going on at Hogwarts.

Patrick Zeller was still on moderately good terms with his estranged wife and daughter, considering that his stint in prison for burglary was the main reason why they were no longer a family. At the beginning, he had known about Rose's magic, as per the Ministry bylaws demanding that all immediate family members know of a child's magic once they turn 11, but not long afterward, Patrick had tried gabbing about the Wizarding World to his friends and had even tried to prove the existence of Diagon Alley to one of his girlfriends. After that, George and a few of his coworkers were sent to deal with the issue and correct the memories of the Muggles Patrick had spoken to. It had also been decided by Minister Fudge that Patrick Zeller was just too big of a liability and had put down the decision that his memory was to be wiped of all knowledge of his daughter's magical talents. Patrick had been inconsolable throughout the entire ordeal at the thought of forgetting all of the beautiful, magical things he had seen, but he accepted the decision all the same.

Despite everything he'd done, Rose bore no ill will toward her father. She was sharp enough and kind enough to see that despite his criminal record and his inability to keep his mouth shut, there was still a lot of good in Patrick Zeller. He still was the funniest, most amiable man she knew. He still carried a picture of Rose as a baby in his wallet and showed it to everyone he met with pride. He still baked Christmas cookies for his coworkers every year. He still without fail sent Rose a new cookbook every Christmas, even when he'd had to work triple-overtime just to afford it. And even though Catherine didn't speak to Patrick much anymore, she never spoke ill of her ex-husband in front of Rose and she supported Rose's decision to keep his surname, even when she'd taken George's.

Rose spent all night writing her mother and George's letter in multicolored ink, before working on a similar, but faintly edited copy for her father. Then she put both in small pink envelopes decorated with blue, green, and purple calligraphy and put them on her bedside table so she could send them in the morning. Then to keep her mind busy waiting for the sun to rise, she started

doodling cacti and robots in the spiral notebook she'd brought. She would never understand why wizards didn't use notebooks— it was so much easier to keep notes in, rather than try to paperclip a whole bunch of loose pieces of parchment together or put them in folders. Her white kitten, Mr. Whiskers, cuddled up in her lap as she doodled, falling asleep on her leg even though his owner was still wide awake.

When it was finally a suitable enough time, Rose scooped Mr. Whiskers off of her lap, jumped out of bed, and dashed up the stairs, her sole focus on getting to the common room to see the notice board. On the way, she collided with a dark-skinned boy from the third year boy's dorm who was also making his way up the stairs.

"Ow!" he said. "Watch where you're going!"

Undeterred, Rose kept running, shooting the boy a frown over her shoulder as she went.

"I am!" she said coolly. "Maybe if *you* were watching where I was going too, you wouldn't have run into me!"

Rose reached the landing at the top of the stairs and practically jaunted over to the notice board, where many other Hufflepuffs were gathered. She squeezed through the crowd to get to the front and found the list of names. And at the very top...

Her blue eyes widened and her mouth spread into the hugest grin.

"I MADE IT!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. *"I MADE IT!"*

A batch of the Hufflepuffs around her burst into applause. One of the upperclassman prefects patted Rose on the shoulder.

"Well done!" he said in slightly inflated, but still perfectly genuine pride.

"Thanks!" Rose chirped brightly.

She bounced around the room as if her feet were on springs, right past the dark-skinned third-year

boy and back down the stairs. She had to add onto her letters and then get them to the owlery right away!

Bridget

Bridget Jaheem slept very well the night after the auditions. Her biscuits had turned out just the way she'd hoped, and Ramsay's reaction to them had been pretty close to how she'd hoped too.

Bridget resisted the urge to write to her mother that very night with some difficulty. Ms. Jaheem had always been Bridget's very best friend and confidante, but Bridget wanted to know the results of her audition for sure before sending her any letters. So in the meantime, Bridget merely skimmed through her old box of recipes, contemplating which ones she might be able to use in the competition.

'Knowing Ramsay, he's probably going to try to stretch us by giving us different sorts of foods every round,' she thought to herself. *'That way he can get the full breadth of our talents.'*

Her black eyes rested on a recipe for Potato Soup with Bacon and Asparagus thoughtfully.

'Might be good for a soup challenge,' she mused. *'Or perhaps for a savory round...'*

This Potato Soup recipe always brought the people into *Lottie's*, in the chilly days of early spring. From the time Bridget was little, she remembered her mother making that soup in her restaurant kitchen herself while the rest of the kitchen staff worked on the rest of the orders, so as to keep their guests from waiting too long. And the food would always be nice and piping hot when it arrived at the guests' tables.

Lottie's had always been stretching to make ends meet. Because the restaurant was so small, they could only bring in a certain number of customers at a time, and because they could only serve so many customers, Charlotte Jaheem had trouble covering the space rental with her earnings. The logical solution would've been to drive up prices, but Ms. Jaheem was much too sharp for that.

"Our regulars are working-class people who want quickly prepared, but savory food," she once remarked to Bridget. "If we make the prices too high, then *no one* will come."

So Ms. Jaheem pinched her pennies and she and Bridget made do with what they had. From time to time, they would find windows perfectly washed before any of their employees had even arrived, or dishes that had been shattered would suddenly be completely fixed when they turned around. Back then, of course, neither of them considered that it might've been Bridget...or that it might've been magic.

When Bridget was accepted into Hogwarts, it actually took a load off of Ms. Jaheem for some of the year. There was a school fund set up for impoverished students, so Bridget could get all of the school supplies she needed even if they were second-hand, and while she was at school, Bridget got everything she needed to eat, so Ms. Jaheem had a little bit extra every year to give her employees bonuses or send Bridget little gifts. Bridget's favorite gifts from her mother, however, even after all these years, were the dishes she'd cook, bundle up, and send to her. In Bridget's first year Ms. Jaheem had even made an entire green bean casserole and had three owls deliver it to her daughter at Hogwarts Christmas morning.

Bridget flipped through her recipes, smiling at each one.

'Pasta primavera – that'd probably be good for a pasta round...mushroom slow-cooked roast beef – that'd probably be good for a roast round, or maybe a comfort food round...black-eyed pea fritters – maybe for a round using legumes?'

She shook her head with a smile. As she came to the end of her recipes, she found the picture she always kept at the very back of the stack.

The picture was of her, around the age of seven, and her mother. Bridget was dressed in a violet tutu, a horned headband, a black, red, and violet cape, and black ballet shoes, and she was grinning from ear to ear despite her two missing front teeth. Ms. Jaheem had both of her arms wrapped around her daughter and looked as proud as if Bridget had been the prima in the English National Ballet.

Bridget *loved* ballet. She'd started when she was three and she'd intimidated most of her classmates with her confidence and level of talent. Because of her supreme confidence, Bridget had often been cast as the villains in their school productions, as evident by the picture, where she'd been dressed as the evil Fairy Carabosse. That had never discouraged Bridget, though – playing the bad guy in the shows was fun! They were so theatrical and over-the-top! And besides, it was only pretend...*she* knew she was really a good person, after all.

It had broken her heart to stop dancing...but not only had ballet classes become much less affordable for her mother, but with her attending Hogwarts over the fall and spring, there was no way Bridget would be able to keep up with ballet classes over the summer holidays alone and expect to keep up. And so Bridget had had to bow to the circumstances at hand and stop taking classes. She'd tried very hard not to show too much of her disappointment to her mother, but it had still hurt. Still Bridget had cooking...and she had magic! Defense Against the Dark Arts and Potions – Bridget loved those classes too, and she was certainly glad that she wouldn't have to give those up...

Bridget smiled at the picture of herself and her mother together for a long moment. Her mother would be proud like that again, if she won Ramsay's competition...and for the first time, *Lottie's* would actually be ahead of the game financially, rather than having to scrape and cut back.

Putting the box away in her nightstand, Bridget turned over in bed and fell asleep, her lips still touched with a smile.

The next morning Bridget came downstairs to find the Slytherin commonroom full of activity. When she arrived, her classmates started to applaud politely. Bridget looked around at them, faintly bemused.

"Um...what's everyone clapping for?" she asked, smiling despite her discomfort.

The fifth year Slytherin prefect laughed.

"They're clapping because you made it into the *contest*, smart one!" he teased. "Nice going."

Bridget was startled. She looked around at the other people in the commonroom. There were a few students – the ones who fancied themselves to be blood purists – who were notably silent, but the vast majority of Slytherin's students were smiling and praising her, clapping, patting her on the back, and complimenting her success. Even in this time, when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was so powerful...Slytherin house applauded the success of a Muggle-born student.

Bridget's lips spread into a broad, triumphant, but still excited grin.

"...Thanks, guys," she said loud enough for everyone to hear her. "I swear to you – I'll do everything I can to get Slytherin the win!"

'I promise, Mum,' she added to herself as everyone burst into applause again. *'I'll win for you.'*

The Chefs Assemble

Everyone in school waited with baited breath for January 10th, the date for the first round of MagicChef Junior, to arrive – none more so than the twelve contestants. Harry had never seen Ron in the library so much in his life, not even back in third year when he was helping Hagrid with Buckbeak's appeal.

“Well, we have no idea what Ramsay's going to have us do in the first round,” Ron explained anxiously to Harry as he put down a stack of heavy magical cookbooks on the table. “So I've got to read up as much as I can ahead of time...”

The MagicChef round was held in the Quidditch pitch – it was the only place large enough to house all of the students who wanted to watch it. Ron had had to meet Ramsay with the other competitors early in the dungeons, so Harry and Hermione wished him the best of luck before he left that morning, while they headed off to Charms class. It had been very strange for Harry, not having Ron sitting next to him during class...Harry and Ron had always taken all of their classes together, even Divination, which was the only class Hermione had ever dropped out of.

When Harry and Hermione arrived in the Quidditch pitch at 4:00 that evening, after classes were over, they found it as transformed as Ramsay's Potions classroom had been. There were twelve expansive kitchen workspaces, lined up in four rows of three, and each was decorated with the school colors of the competitor the station belonged to. The four houses' colors also decorated the stands, and the pillars surrounding the stadium had magically appearing text and pictures dancing across them. At that moment, the words “**MagicChef Junior: Round 1**” were being spelled out letter by letter, and then the Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin crests flashed across the banners one at a time, to the applause of each house in turn. On every seat in the bleachers was a free pair of Omnioculars like the one Harry had back in his trunk in the Gryffindor commonroom.

Harry and Hermione found seats next to Ginny, who had decided to sit at the cross-section between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw stands so she could sit by Luna Lovegood. Luna was looking as odd as ever, wearing earrings that looked like they'd been made out of a bunch of bottle caps that had been strung together.

“Hey, Luna,” greeted Harry.

“Hello, Harry,” she said dreamily. “I brought some caramelized Toadstools, for a snack...would you like one?”

She offered a box of what vaguely looked like mushrooms, except they were blackened and as limp as chewed bubble gum.

“No thanks,” Harry said offhandedly.

Ginny looked at Harry, her lips twitching with some nerves. “How’s Ron doing?”

“All right, I think,” Harry answered.

“Ron’s going to have a hard time of it,” Luna said vaguely. “Arjuna Belaji apparently won three blue ribbons for her cooking by the time she was ten...and Cho’s cakes are quite good.”

Hermione glanced at Harry uncomfortably. “That’s right – Cho’s in the competition too...I’d forgotten...”

Harry had forgotten too. He’d been so excited for Ron that he’d barely given the other competitors much thought. Even when Colin Creevey came up to them to excitedly tell them he’d made it and to wish Ron the best of luck, Harry’s focus had still not widened that much beyond Ron, given how much he wanted to encourage him.

Ginny frowned deeply, her eyes darting from Harry to Luna. “Ron’ll kick Cho’s arse – you just wait and see.”

After about fifteen minutes in which everyone found their seats, four figures started striding up the lawn. In the lead was Ramsay; just behind him were Dumbledore and two others Harry didn’t recognize. The first was a tall older woman with full lips, dark skin, and a mane of curly black-brown hair, dressed in ridiculously bright orange dress robes. The second was a man who, at first glance, rather resembled a walrus, with a silver handlebar mustache and a very short, portly frame that he decked out in emerald green velvet robes complete with a brown hound’s-tooth waistcoat with gold buttons.

Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm.

“That woman is Millicent Bagnold!” she hissed in his ear. “She was the Minister of Magic before Fudge!”

Now that Hermione said it, Harry realized he had heard the name before, in one of Dumbledore's memories in the Pensieve. She'd been the Minister who'd been in charge during the First Wizarding War and who had overseen the prosecution of most of Voldemort's followers after it – she'd been the one who sent Sirius to Azkaban. The thought left a sour taste in Harry's mouth.

Ramsay faced the crowd. Taking out his silver-tipped wand, he placed it up against his mouth and magically magnified his voice with the spell "*Sonorous!*"

"Good evening, one and all!" he greeted. "Welcome to the first round of the very first MagicChef Junior competition, hosted here at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

Harry noticed several white flashes coming from the teachers' box. When he glanced over, he noticed a rather excitable-looking woman with very curly blue-dyed hair put up in a high ponytail snapping away – her pink cat's eye glasses reminded him irritably of Rita Skeeter.

'Guess she must be from the Daily Prophet,' he supposed. He wondered if Ramsay's reputation alone had earned this event press coverage, or if Ramsay had actively sought it out – either way, he seemed all too comfortable in front of the cameras.

"Firstly, let me introduce the four judges for this competition," said Ramsay. "In essence of fairness, each house will be represented by a judge who is an alumnus of that house. First off, we have your school headmaster, Albus Dumbledore," he indicated Dumbledore with none of the distrust he usually showed, "representing the noble house of Gryffindor..."

The Gryffindors all screamed and applauded. Dumbledore waved airily at the crowd with his good hand, his elderly face crinkled up with the tiniest traces of a smile.

"Next, we have an alumnus of the Hogwarts staff, who taught the art of Potions for almost thirty years and who singularly funded the renovation and expansion of the Hogwarts kitchens out of his own pocket...Horace Slughorn, representing the peerless house of Slytherin."

"Ramsay mentioned him – when I first met him!" Harry whispered to Hermione, as the walrus-mustached man waved at the applauding and cheering Slytherins in the stands. "He said Slughorn was his teacher, back at school..."

"Third, we have a former Minister of Magic who, in retirement, has written almost fifteen books,

including eight wonderful cookbooks...Millicent Bagnold, representing the brilliant house of Ravenclaw.”

The Ravenclaw stands burst into applause even before Ramsay had finished speaking. Bagnold gave them a dewy smile and a wave that Harry thought came across as awfully staged – like she’d done that exact same wave a thousand times, so as to make sure she looked flawless in any pictures that might be taken of her.

“And finally, you’ve got me,” said Ramsay, his mouth spreading into a large grin as his voice rose to a triumphant shout himself, “representing the best of the entire lot, the house of Hufflepuff!”

The Hufflepuff side of the stands erupted in whooping, clapping, and stomping, so much so that even when some members from the other houses tried booing, all anyone could really hear was Hufflepuff’s happiness.

Bagnold, her lips twitching with a daring smile, used her own wand to magnify her voice too.

“Oh, now, Gordon,” she proclaimed to the stands in a tone that once again sounded rehearsed to Harry’s ears, “don’t go riling up the children with house pride. The best competitor shall be the victor, regardless of house...” her voice rose amusedly, “...and we all know Ravenclaw has the sharpest and most creative minds of them all!”

The Ravenclaw stands echoed her with more applause. Slughorn, with a chuckle, stepped forward, bringing his own wand to his mouth to magnify his voice too.

“Mind the ego, Millie, my dear,” he said jovially. “After all, brilliance and creativity are only *two* things we’ll be judging today. A good chef also needs resourcefulness and the ability to take risks...something Slytherin house has in spades!” he finished, his voice having risen to a perfect bellow.

The Slytherin stands screamed and cheered.

When Dumbledore stepped forward, resting his own wand on the top of his white beard to magnify his voice, everyone was on the edge of their seat to hear his response. The other judges turned to look at him too. Dumbledore looked around, smiling pleasantly at them all; then, after a long moment, he spoke.

“...Gryffindor.”

The one word hung in the air for one, two, three seconds...and then Dumbledore lowered his wand, clearly thinking he didn't need to say anything else.

Harry was the first one to start laughing, and the laughter that overtook Gryffindor's side of the stands quickly evolved into a huge roar of applause. Dumbledore smiled wryly at the other judges, who shot him faintly frustrated, but still amused looks.

“And now, we'll introduce our twelve competitors!” said Ramsay. “From my house of Hufflepuff, I give to you...Rose Zeller! Owen Cauldwell! Kevin Whitby! And Hannah Abbott!”

The four Hufflepuffs dashed out from the left-hand side of the pitch, skipping across the green over to their stations one by one, to the applause of their house. Rose, who had been twirling and dancing the whole way, made it to her station first, while Owen took his time, waving around at everyone in the crowd as he strolled leisurely to his station.

“From Ravenclaw,” said Bagnold, “I am pleased to introduce...Arjuna Belaji! Astoria Greengrass! And Cho Chang!”

The three Ravenclaw girls came out from the right side of the pitch, waving at the cheering crowd as they walked quickly to their stations. Of the three, Astoria looked the least comfortable – Cho looked perfectly at ease in front of the crowd, and even Arjuna smiled politely and waved quite gracefully, but Astoria seemed to be waving more out of expectation than out of any particular excitement.

“From Slytherin,” said Slughorn, “I proudly present...Bridget Jaheem! Millicent Bulstrode! And Daphne Greengrass!”

The three Slytherin girls strode out from the back of the pitch, all looking effortlessly confident as they marched to their stations in a straight, military-like line to the hollers and cheers of their housemates. Bridget even flashed a white smile and blew a kiss to the stands.

Dumbledore raised his wand to his mouth again. “And finally...from Gryffindor house...I call forward Colin Creevey...and Ron Weasley!”

Colin and Ron darted out from under the stands and up the field. Colin turned as he walked, waving at his friends in the stands, but Ron didn't turn back once, instead just barreling right to his station even as the Gryffindors burst into deafening cheers. Harry recognized the stiffness in his friend's posture and he felt his blood run cold.

"He looks anxious," Hermione whispered, and she sounded just as concerned.

Harry knew it was much worse. Ron had gone this way before Quidditch matches before – he would think that he couldn't do it, and then he would just stew in those thoughts longer and longer until his mind went blank and he forgot absolutely everything.

Ginny, noticing the concern on both of their faces, turned to watch her brother in the stands apprehensively.

"Come on, Ron," she murmured under her breath, "don't blow it..."

"These are your top 12 best student chefs, Hogwarts!" proclaimed Ramsay. "In this competition, they will have to use both their baking and magical talents to try to get to the top of the heap in this competition – and the prize of 5000 Galleons, 200 points for their house, a free reservation for their family at Hell's Kitchen, and the title of the very first *MagicChef Junior*!"

The crowd applauded and cheered. Hermione turned to Harry and Ginny confusedly.

"Magical talent?" she repeated, confused, as Ramsay kept speaking to the crowd. "I didn't know they'd be allowed to use *magic* in the competition..."

"Well, sure," said Ginny. "A lot of witches and wizards use magic in their cooking, to mix ingredients and help things cook a certain way...Mum tends to see it sort of like cheating, but she's been known to levitate things out of the oven when she's got a lot to do. With how restrictive their time tables are going to be, I'm willing to bet they'll have to use magic to stay ahead..."

"Seems to me that puts the younger students at a disadvantage," Hermione said with a frown.

"And Ron, too," pointed out Luna, her vague tone punctuated by grimness. "Did your mother teach him how to use magic while he was cooking, Ginny?"

Ginny blinked, not having considered this.

“I...I don’t know,” she said slowly, her brown eyes growing very concerned. “I think she was more focused on him learning about flavors, and textures, and stuff like that...I mean, Ron had never cooked on his own before, so he had a lot to catch up on...” She glanced at the others. “Harry, Hermione, do you remember her mentioning magic to him?”

“I don’t think so,” Hermione replied meekly. She looked at Ron in the stands, her gloved fists resting over her mouth anxiously. “Oh, Ron...no *wonder* he’s nervous...”

“...Here to support you in your challenges,” said Ramsay, “are your house-elf partners, who each chose to be your resource and help you during your time in the competition.”

“Colin,” said Dumbledore, “you were selected by Qubie – who, if I may say, is easily the fastest at making a delicious hot chocolate of any elf I have ever met.”

A house elf with big blue eyes appeared on top of Colin’s station. The Gryffindor boy amiably offered Qubie a handshake, which startled the elf, but he obliged.

“And Ron...I do believe you’ll be very happy with your partner during this competition,” Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye.

Dobby the house elf, still dressed in his earless red cap and decked out in the mismatched Christmas socks he’d gotten from Harry last year, appeared at Ron’s station. He immediately grabbed both of Ron’s hands and shook them gleefully.

“Oh, Dobby got to be Ron’s partner!” whispered Hermione, delighted. “That’s *wonderful*!”

“Rose,” said Ramsay with a smile, “you were chosen by Tip, who I think is the only elf who can keep up with your level of energy. Owen, your partner is Joly – a risk-taker with flavors, just like you are. Kevin, you’ll be working with Niknak – who, honestly, were he a wizard, I think would’ve been Sorted in Hufflepuff himself. And finally, Hannah...you were chosen by Pilo, a chef who always takes charge in the Hogwarts kitchens.”

Each house elf appeared on top of the students’ stations; Rose, like Colin, immediately moved to shake her elf’s hand, but the other wizard-born students merely greeted them with pleasant smiles.

“Arjuna,” said Bagnold, her tone swimming in the sort of dignified and restrained amusement that Harry had heard in Fudge’s voice before, “your elf will be Didi – she is the most loyal companion you could hope to find. For Astoria, we have Poppy, who is quick on her feet and sharp of mind. And Cho, you will be working with Reddy, who, true to his name, is ready to work and to win.”

All the Ravenclaw girls, being of magical heritage, merely greeted their elves politely when they appeared, though Cho gave her elf something of an abbreviated bow of the head, which pleased him greatly.

“And finally,” boomed Slughorn jovially, “to my students! My sweet Bridget, you’ll be working with Hardy – a perfect rock of an elf, who will always be there to help with whatever you need. And my beautiful Daphne, your help will be Koko, who has written her own recipes for her fellow elves to use in the kitchens. And my dear Millicent, you will be working with Winky – in her words, there was no other chef she wanted to work with but you!”

When the Slytherins’ elves appeared, Bridget, like Colin and Rose, shook her elf’s hand. To the surprise of everyone, however, Winky, upon appearing at Millicent’s station, immediately started chattering to her excitedly, and Millicent actually smiled back!

“Winky didn’t want to work with any other chef...but *Millicent Bulstrode*?” Hermione couldn’t help but repeat, dumbfounded. “*Why?*”

Harry shrugged. “Well, Winky was always sort of weird...I mean, her last owner was *Crouch*, and she would’ve set herself on fire for him.”

Hermione frowned disapprovingly at Harry.

“The teams are assembled,” Ramsay finished dramatically, “the judges’ table is set, and the kitchen is calling...MagicChef Junior starts right now!”

Round 1: Pre-Heat

“Our first challenge,” proclaimed Dumbledore, “will entail one of my personal favorite breakfast foods...”

With a wave of his wand, he summoned a box that had been sitting at the judges’ table set up on the sidelines. Tapping the box, he made it fade away into smoke, leaving behind a plate in his hand. On the plate was a small stack of...

“...Pancakes,” Dumbledore finished with a small smile.

They did look delicious. The crepe-like English pancakes looked soft and warm, and they were decorated with some lemon wedges and lots of sugar.

“For this challenge,” said Dumbledore, “each chef will have to make as many perfectly cooked pancakes as possible in five minutes.”

“Making pancakes quickly is harder than it sounds,” interjected Ramsay. “If you flip them too soon, they’ll break and you’ll make a big mess. If you take too much time, you have the potential of burning your pancakes, and of course you won’t make as many. It’s a very tricky balancing act that a good chef must be able to master.”

“Once you have completed your pancakes, we will remove any that are too small, too thin, too thick, too underdone, or too overdone,” said Bagnold. “We will then count that final number of perfect pancakes, and the one with the highest amount will receive an advantage in the next round. But there is another wrinkle...”

With a wave of her wand, she summoned a set of four chairs to sit at the judges’ table. At the top of each chair was a large clear container filled with a white, batter-like liquid.

“The winner of this challenge,” Bagnold said, her tone quite controlled even though the students in the stands and at the kitchen stations were looking at the chairs with incredulous disbelief, “will save their house representative from being drenched in five liters of pancake batter.”

Most of the competitors started to laugh. Hannah tried desperately to stifle her giggles behind her hands, while Colin burst out into full laughter.

“Hufflepuffs,” Ramsay said, putting on a tone of mock fragility, “while you’re making your pancakes, please consider...how much work I put into my hair every morning...and how much that batter could ruin it.”

Both the stands and the chefs laughed.

“My robes are made of elf-sewn velvet,” Slughorn said, giving the Slytherin girls an over-the-top pout that even seemed to make his silver mustache droop. “And they match my eyes *just so...*”

Everyone laughed a little harder – even Slughorn chuckled a bit at his own joke.

“Your five minutes,” announced Bagnold, “to make as many pancakes as possible starts...*now!*”

The next five minutes were positively insane. The crowd started shouting words of encouragement, while the competitors dashed around, sifting flour, breaking eggs, and making batter. Within thirty seconds, all the competitors had made their batter – though, as Harry had feared, Ron was the last to finish his. The youngest Weasley boy looked very frazzled as he started pouring his batter into a pan.

“Come on, Ron!” roared Harry as loud as he could, praying that some way Ron would hear him over all the other voices. “You can do it!”

Harry could barely focus on any of the other competitors, keeping his Omnioculars squarely on Ron. Hermione, however, was looking around at the other student chefs, and she kept murmuring comments to Harry about them.

“Arjuna Belaji is using a Levitation Charm to flip all of hers...that’s brilliant! That way she wouldn’t break them if she tries flipping them too soon, like she would with a spatula –Millicent Bulstrode is using the Cold Fire enchantment at her kitchen, so she can have more than four burners at her station – Hannah’s moving a little slower, but her pancakes all look perfect – wow, look at Colin! He’s flipping his so fast!”

Ron, however, was struggling. Harry saw several of Ron’s pancakes break as soon as he tried flipping them, and Ron was starting to sweat.

“Get it together, Ron!” screamed Ginny, who was watching Ron through her Omnioculars too.

By the time Ramsay counted down the last few seconds on the clock and called “time,” the stands had almost screamed themselves hoarse and the competitors looked close to fainting. Each student chef had a stack of pancakes in front of them – the judges came to look over each stack, shedding all the ones that didn’t fit their standards. Arjuna’s impressive stack of pancakes was left untouched. Poor Owen Cauldwell had half of his stack taken out for being too small.

When it was Ron’s turn, Dumbledore looked over his stack (noticeably smaller than the others)... and then proceeded to take one – two – five – eight –

Harry’s mouth dropped open in fury. “*What is he doing?!*”

“They must be underdone!” said Hermione, and she also looked very upset.

The Gryffindors started to yell and boo angrily as Ron’s stack shrunk – by the time Dumbledore was finished, Ron only had two lone pancakes left on his plate, and he looked close to tears.

Dumbledore, noticing Ron’s upset, placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered some words that looked like they had to be comforting. Ron, however, was numb, unable to be comforted in the least, as Dumbledore swept back to the judges’ table. The judges commiserated amongst themselves.

“The most pancakes I counted,” said Ramsay, “was from Hannah Abbott – 11 pancakes.”

Hufflepuff’s stands cheered. Hannah looked very proud of herself.

“The most pancakes I counted,” said Bagnold, “was from Arjuna Belaji – 16 pancakes.”

Ravenclaw’s stands started screaming. Luna gave a polite golfer’s clap as Arjuna waved to the stands, smiling widely.

“The most pancakes I counted,” said Slughorn, “was from Bridget Jaheem – 15 pancakes.”

The Slytherins gave faint groans, clearly disappointed that Bridget was two short from beating Arjuna, but clapped for their competitor anyway. Bridget, however, didn't look the least bit disappointed – she was smiling wider than Arjuna and had her arms crossed confidently.

“The most pancakes I counted,” said Dumbledore, taking his time a bit more than the other judges so as to build up suspense, “was from Colin Creevey...with 19 pancakes.”

Gryffindor's stands gave surprised outbursts – then the surprise gave way to a roar of applause. Colin proudly threw both arms into the air, beaming widely with triumph.

“And so,” Dumbledore said in satisfaction, “I am safe from the batter over my head. The other judges, I'm afraid to say...are not so lucky. Colin...would you do the honors and tilt those canisters over?”

Colin looked both thrilled and a little terrified. Dumbledore beckoned him forward, and he came up behind Slughorn first, as the Slytherin judge was closest. Gryffindor's stands cheered, and Colin looked from them to Slughorn.

“...Are you sure it's all right?” he asked a little nervously.

“A game's a game, m'boy,” Slughorn said jovially. “Go on.”

With that reassurance, Colin beamed at Slughorn and tipped the batter over. It splattered on top of Slughorn's bald, round head, trickling through his handlebar mustache and staining his emerald robes as the crowd and many of the student chefs burst into laughter. Even Daphne Greengrass hid an amused smile behind her hand.

Next came Millicent Bagnold. When Colin came up behind her, she gave an airy sigh. He poured the batter over her head too – it trailed through her dark curls, dripping off onto her orange robes and caking her face in white. She exhaled heavily, licking her lips as the crowd started laughing again.

“Well...this pancake batter is an improvement over the mud that usually gets thrown at me from the *Daily Prophet*,” she said coolly. “If nothing else, it tastes a lot better.”

Colin came up behind Ramsay next – even the Hufflepuff stands were shouting and cheering at this point. Ramsay looked up at Colin with a wry smile.

“Any chance for mercy, Colin?” he asked coyly. “For my hair?”

The crowd burst into a mix of laughter and jeering. Colin grinned.

“Nope,” he said, shaking his head.

And he tilted the canister above Ramsay’s head over. The batter spilled out in a flood over his head, soaking his hair and splashing onto his shoulders. Ramsay inhaled and exhaled, his cheeks puffing out like a puffer fish as the crowd went wild.

Dumbledore smiled down the row at the other judges soaked in batter, letting the crowd quiet down before speaking again.

“Dear me,” he said nonchalantly. “It seems I’m no longer dressed for the occasion. Colin?”

“Yes, sir?” said Colin.

Dumbledore waved his wand at the canister over his head – suddenly it was filled to the brim with even more pancake batter.

“...Kindly tip mine over as well, would you?”

The crowd roared with approval. Colin, looking more eager than ever, dashed forward and, with a little difficulty, tipped the full-to-the-brim canister over.

The white batter soaked Dumbledore’s pointed wizard’s hat, making it flop over into his face. One could barely make out where the batter landed in his white beard, but the spatters and splashes were perfectly noticeable on the front and shoulders of his star-patterned purple robes and on his smiling, wrinkled face. Dumbledore chuckled too as the stands burst into a round of applause punctuated by even more laughter.

“Now that we’re a proper set,” he said evenly, “I believe we’ll just need a few minutes to...*freshen up* again. In that time, chefs, please take a short break...and we’ll begin our elimination challenge shortly.”

Round 1: Elimination

About fifteen minutes later, the judges were back, dressed in new robes. Dumbledore was now wearing midnight blue decorated with constellations. Slughorn wore elegant black robes made from Egyptian cotton and decorated with gold trim. Bagnold wore pastel pink robes with a high collar and bell-shaped sleeves with tight white arm-warmers underneath. Ramsay, contrary to the other judges, wore robes almost comically identical to the white chef-like ones he'd been wearing before.

“Now then,” Ramsay said, running a hand through his once-again-presentable hair, “chefs...it's time for our elimination challenge. This challenge will, like our timed preheat, involve breakfast food. Your house elves will each provide you a card with one of three breakfast staples written on it – eggs, bacon, or milk – which you must incorporate in a breakfast entrée. The hard part, however, is that you will be limited on how many ingredients you can use.”

He took out his wand and gestured to each plate of pancakes still set up at each kitchen station. With a wave, he materialized glowing yellow numbers in mid-air over each of the plates – **10** over Astoria's, **8** over Kevin's, **16** over Arjuna's, **9** over Daphne's, **10** over Rose's, **19** over Colin's, **12** over Millicent's, **11** over Hannah's, **15** over Bridget's, **6** over Owen's, **13** over Cho's, and finally **2** over Ron's.

“Those numbers represent how many perfect pancakes you made during the last round,” said Ramsay, “and you may use up to that number of ingredients, including the one we provide for you, to make your breakfast entrée. You may use less...but if you use more, then it will count against you.”

Hermione's hands flew to her mouth. “But...but that means...!”

“Ron can only use *two ingredients* in his next dish?!” shouted Ginny, looking both horrified and outraged. “How is he supposed to make *anything* with just two ingredients – especially if one of them is already *assigned* to him?!”

Down in the pitch, Ron had gone as white as a sheet.

“At the end of this round,” continued Ramsay, “two of you will be leaving the competition.”

“You will have one hour to complete your dish,” said Slughorn. “Your time starts...now!”

All of the student chefs turned to their elves, looking over the cards they were given. Bridget looked up from her card to Hardy the house elf, quickly listing off everything she was going to need. Colin ran to take out a mixing bowl, a pan, and a couple dozen cooking utensils, while also chattering with Qubie about his entrée idea. Ron, however, didn't immediately run to start making his dish – instead all he could do was stare at his card, likely reading it over and over as he tried desperately to think.

“He’s panicking,” Harry muttered, and he swore under his breath. Racking his brain, he tried desperately to think of something. He *had* to snap Ron out of it – he had to remind Ron that he could do it – like he did with the Quidditch match –

The memory triggered a thought in Harry’s brain. The idea quickly taking root, he opened his mouth and abruptly started singing at the top of his lungs.

“Weasley can save anything!”

His loud, off-key voice made Hermione turn and gawk at him. Through a thick blush, Harry pressed on.

“He never leaves a single ring!

That’s why Gryffindors all sing

Weasley is our king!”

A few other Gryffindors turned around to stare at Harry. Quickly figuring out what Harry was doing, Ginny joined in, shouting the song just as badly.

“Weasley is a gem within!

He’s true and loyal to his kin!”

Hermione and Luna jumped in, sounding just as awful.

“Weasley will make sure we win!”

Neville, Seamus and Dean, who'd been sitting close by, helped out too.

“Weasley is our king!”

Soon all the other Gryffindors were catching on. The song started to bubble up over the crowd, starting off rather quiet, but then rising to a roar loud enough that everyone could hear it with perfect clarity, including all of the student chefs.

“Weasley can save anything!

He never leaves a single ring!

That's why Gryffindors all sing

Weasley is our king!

Weasley is a gem within!

He's true and loyal to his kin!

Weasley will make sure we win!

Weasley is our king!

Weasley is our king!

Weasley is our king!

He didn't let the Quaffle in!

Weasley is our king!”

Ron stared out at the crowd as they sang the song a second time. His eyes rippled with emotion and disbelief, unable to believe what was happening – and then he realized there was another voice that had jumped in too.

He turned around and saw that Colin, who was in the middle of mixing various ingredients in a bowl at his station, was also singing the song through a big grin, while also giving a thumbs-up.

His heart fluttering in response to the encouragement, Ron gave Colin a small smile and a thumbs-up in return. Colin stopped singing and went back to cooking, and Ron hurried to grab a small bowl and a whisk from the cabinet and turned to Dobby, commiserating over ingredients. His flurry of activity made the Gryffindors cheer, and then finally quiet as all the competitors started to cook.

As the end of the hour approached, all the students were hard at work. Astoria had accidentally burned a piece of her hair while trying to cook her breakfast bread pudding faster using magic. Rose had finished her braided Nutella banana bread a little early, and so was now decorating both the slices and the plate with butter rosettes and edible glitter. Kevin had not only made a delicious-looking breakfast pie with a bacon lattice crust, but he was also rushing to make a homemade maple syrup glaze that he could layer on top. Hannah took her beignets out of the oven and with only a minute left on the clock was tapping each one with her wand, enchanting them to change colors and to levitate over the plate, wafting their amazing smell around the work stations. Cho had had to start over, as she'd burned the handmade milk and caramel frosting she'd made for her cinnamon rolls.

When the timer was up, all the student chefs were breathing hard as they stepped back from their kitchens. The crowd burst into applause, and then the judging began.

Each dish in turn was levitated off of the student chef's countertop and brought to the judge's table. The student who had cooked it would then step forward to face the judges, as they went down the line, from Dumbledore to Ramsay to Bagnold to Slughorn, and tasted each dish.

First was Cho. Her milk and caramel frosting turned out better the second time she'd made it, but alas, the frosting overpowered the flavor of her cinnamon rolls. Still, Slughorn praised the softness of her pastry and didn't hold back in finishing it off.

Next was Colin. He had decided to use the full amount of ingredients he was allowed to use – including his assigned flavor of bacon, as well as eggs, maple syrup, jam, dates, prunes, figs, and about five different spices – to create an astounding 19-ingredient omelet. When Dumbledore took a bite of it, he successfully fought back a shudder – Ramsay, Bagnold, and Slughorn did not. They applauded Colin's ambition, but had to acknowledge that the many disparate flavors just fought with each other too much to make a cohesive whole.

Next, Rose. Her braided Nutella and banana bread wowed the judges, particularly since most of them had never tried Nutella before. Ramsay, the lone judge who had, critiqued Rose's presentation, saying that she might want to lay off on the edible glitter, while also opening his mouth wide to show off the solidly gold interior pointedly.

Next came Kevin. The judges all praised his flavors and Slughorn applauded his beautiful latticing, but Bagnold felt that the dish overall was a touch too crispy and that the maple syrup glaze was too

thick.

Next was Astoria. Her breakfast bread pudding really appealed to Bagnold and Slughorn's taste buds, but Dumbledore and Ramsay were a little less enthused. Ramsay also pointed out that Astoria's pudding was not baked consistently all the way through and told her he was disappointed she didn't take more risks.

Next, Millicent. Her smoked-salmon scrambled eggs, which she'd placed on top of a slice of wheat toast, charmed the judges, though Bagnold expressed disappointment that Millicent had not had more time, so she could've shopped around or baked her own bread with more unique flavors, rather than having to use standard, pre-made bread from the pantry.

Next came Owen. He had gotten it in his head to make a "breakfast milkshake" with lots of maple syrup, ice cream, and hand-baked donuts. The result ended up being too sweet for the majority of the judges (though Dumbledore said he'd be willing to eat it in stages), but Ramsay praised Owen's creativity, vision, and variety of cooking techniques.

Next was Arjuna. Bagnold compared her Sali Par Edu to something out of a cookbook, with her eggs being perfectly cooked and her potatoes being expertly deep-fried, and the judges loved Arjuna's Charm work that made little fireworks burst around the plate every time the entrée was sampled.

Next, Daphne. Her blackberry-mint breakfast scones were quite tasty, but Ramsay was very disappointed that she'd had to use frozen blackberries, as the fruit was out-of-season. He suggested substituting the blackberries with a citrus like orange, which was in season during the winter.

Finally it was Ron's turn. He went up before the judges, keeping his head high despite his nerves. He knew everyone was behind him – he could do this...

"Hello, Ron," Ramsay greeted him.

"Hi, professor," Ron responded, his voice much more level than he thought it would be.

"Can you tell us, please, what ingredient you were assigned, how many ingredients you were allowed to use, and finally, what you've made for us?"

Ron took a deep breath.

“...Well...I was assigned eggs...and I was only allowed to use two ingredients...so I’ve made for you bacon and eggs, three different ways. The first is a hardboiled egg with a grilled bacon filling; the second is scrambled eggs with bacon bits; and the third is a modified toad-in-the-hole, with a sunny-side-up egg inside of an engorged slice of bacon.”

As the judges sampled Ron’s dishes one by one, their expressions were thoughtful. Finally Dumbledore spoke.

“Ron...you, more than any other competitor today, had the steepest mountain to climb,” he said solemnly. “Your disappointing display in the preheat placed you at a *distinct* disadvantage, with you only being allowed to use two ingredients in your dish. However...” he smiled, “...you handled that disadvantage very well.”

Ron exhaled in immense relief. “...Thank you, sir!”

“Ron, is it?” asked Bagnold. “Tell me, how did you put your grilled bacon filling into your hard-boiled egg?”

“I transfigured it,” Ron answered eagerly. “I used a Switching Spell and supplemented the egg yolk with the bacon...”

“Well, Minerva McGonagall should be very proud, indeed!” boomed Slughorn. “And using an Engorgement Charm on your bacon to make it big enough to hold the sunny-side-up was a lovely idea! Excellent use of magic!”

Ramsay nodded politely to Slughorn and then turned to Ron. “...I will admit, Ron, that without any additional ingredients, your flavors are quite bland. This dish is *not* up-to-par with the rest in this competition. But considering your limitations, you performed admirably.”

Ron nodded. “...Thank you.”

He walked back to his station, too overwhelmed to hear the cheering of the Gryffindors or even to focus on the critiques made on the rest of the participants’ dishes.

The judges had been impressed with what he had done...but would it be enough to save him from elimination?

After the last dishes had been reviewed, the judges talked amongst themselves for about ten minutes. Then they came out from behind their table and addressed both the crowd and the student chefs, who stood in a line just in front of the stands awaiting the results.

“My dear chefs...all of you performed very admirably in this first round,” said Slughorn. “You should be *very* proud of what you have accomplished here today. But some of you, more than the others, thoroughly impressed us. Those chefs are...Rose – ”

Rose gave a quiet little squeal of joy, jumping up and down twice like a giddy kangaroo.

“ – Bridget – ”

Bridget grinned, her pearl white teeth gleaming as she glanced at her fellow Slytherin competitors standing on either side of her.

“ – Arjuna – ”

Arjuna’s lips spread into a proud smile and she inclined her head politely to the judges.

“ – and Hannah.”

Hannah clutched her heart with both hands, her eyes closing in relief and excitement.

“Of those four chefs, however, only *one* can win this opening round,” Slughorn added with a wag of his finger. “That chef is...”

The Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin stands all sat stock-still, awaiting the answer. The four girls also looked like they were on tenterhooks.

“...Arjuna.”

Ravenclaw’s stands burst into cheers and applause. Arjuna beamed, and she waved up to her classmates as if she were in a beauty pageant.

“Congratulations, Arjuna,” Bagnold said proudly. “Your Sali Par Edu was *flawlessly* executed, with every piece of the dish deliciously prepared. I think even a full-grown chef would have trouble doing better.”

She then turned to the remaining eight student chefs.

“Some of you have also more than proved your worth this round...enough that we feel very comfortable in you proceeding. Those chefs are...Millicent – ”

Millicent exhaled quietly, her eyes sliding closed as she bowed her head.

“ – Kevin – ”

Kevin beamed from ear to ear; clasping his hands together, he mouthed “*thank you!*” to the judges.

“ – Daphne – ”

Daphne relaxed, her lips curling up in a faintly relieved smile.

“ – and Cho.”

Cho covered her face with both hands, clearly trying to pull herself together.

“That leaves,” said Ramsay, “Astoria – Owen – Colin – and Ron. Please step forward.”

The four took a step forward, away from the remainder of the chefs. Ron glanced out the corner of

his eye at the others. Owen looked very nervous – he kept biting the inside of his cheek. Colin’s shoulders were hunched as if he was shrinking before Ron’s eyes. Astoria had gone very white, but stubbornly stared the judges right in the eye.

“Astoria,” said Ramsay. “Your breakfast bread pudding was not evenly cooked and your flavors left the judges split.

“Owen. Your maple donut milkshake was much too sweet, and quite honestly, a milkshake really screams ‘*dessert*’ more than ‘*breakfast food*.’

“Colin. Your ambitious 19-ingredient omelet was almost inedible. Your flavors fought for domination in your dish, and unfortunately not one of them won.

“Ron. Your bacon-and-eggs three different ways was *incredibly* bland, largely due to the fact that you only were able to make *two* suitable pancakes during the preheat.”

He looked around at the four chefs, his expression unreadable. Ron’s knees started knocking.

“The two chefs who will end their journey today are...”

It felt like the entire arena was holding its breath.

“...Colin and Owen.”

Ron felt like he was going to deflate like a balloon. His shoulders fell sharply and he let out a huge exhale of relief. He was going on! He’d actually made it through!

“I’m sorry, boys,” Ramsay said gently. “You are both excellent chefs, and we are sad to lose you. Hufflepuff...Gryffindor...please give a round of applause to your student chefs, for their wonderful effort!”

The students in the stands started to clap. Astoria whispered something kind to Owen, and he smiled politely and thanked her. Ron glanced at Colin and saw that the poor boy was fighting back tears. Ron instantly felt ashamed of himself for how relieved he’d felt.

With only the faintest hesitation, the Gryffindor prefect took a step toward Colin and grabbed hold of his shoulder. The younger boy looked up, startled.

“I’m really sorry, Colin,” Ron muttered lowly, squeezing Colin’s shoulder.

Tears flooding his eyes, Colin nonetheless beamed at Ron.

“Aw, it’s...” he sniffed, “it’s okay...it’s just...I kind of blew it...that’s all...”

“You did not,” Ron argued. “You made more pancakes than any of us.”

“Yeah – but that advantage I got for it...I didn’t use it right,” Colin mumbled. “You had no advantage – you had the biggest disadvantage of all, and you...you made your dish work anyway. Doesn’t matter how fast I can flip pancakes...if I can’t get my flavors right...”

“You’d have done better, if you had another chance,” Ron said stubbornly.

Colin’s smile broadened as tears streaked down his face. Then he stepped forward and actually gave Ron a hug, which the older boy accepted after he’d successfully gotten over his surprise. The Gryffindor stands started clapping a little louder, and a few people even cried both Colin and Ron’s names.

“Looks like you’ll be the only Gryffindor left!” Colin whispered in Ron’s ear, his tone bright even through his tears. “So go get ‘em! Okay?”

Ron patted the younger boy on the back. “...Okay.”

Ramsay smiled at the two of them, before facing the applauding crowd again.

“The next round, with our top 10 chefs, will take place right here, a week from now! Please show your student chefs your support before they face their next challenge...and we look forward to seeing you then!”

The Invitation

Over the next few days, all the students of Hogwarts were chattering breathlessly about the first round's results, as well as what they thought might happen next. Some people even started theorizing and placing bets about whom they thought would be eliminated in the next round.

Arjuna Belaji quickly became the favorite to win the competition. Harry noticed that she was stopped in the hallway a lot by fellow Ravenclaws and even some students from the other houses asking her questions and wishing her luck in the next round. Arjuna's friend Astoria, on the other hand, most people assumed wouldn't last much longer, since she'd already been in the bottom four.

"It's one of Ravenclaw house's worst flaws, sad to say," Luna said serenely. "We may be more open to people being different or having a unique point of view...but many of us can't help but look down on failure."

Harry had a meeting scheduled with Dumbledore that Monday, so while Harry went to the meeting and Hermione headed off to Ancient Runes, Ron made his way down to the library. He hoped to find a few more good cookbooks that he could study over the course of the day while Harry and Hermione did their homework in the evening – and hopefully, since so many of the younger classes were still in session, he'd beat the rush of fifth year students going to the library to study for their OWLS.

When he reached the library, Ron shuffled through the rows to the section that housed all the magical cookbooks. When he got there, however, he found someone else already perusing the titles.

It was Cho.

She turned at the sound of his approach – when they locked eyes, they immediately looked away in discomfort.

"...Hello," Ron mumbled.

"Hello," Cho replied back stiffly.

An awkward silence fell between them as they scanned book titles, occasionally slipping one out to get a better look.

Ron and Cho had never particularly gotten on. Not only was Cho Ron's best friend's ex-girlfriend, but also Ron and Cho's first real interaction involved Ron getting up in her face about her favorite Quidditch team, the Tutshill Tornados. And of course Cho was the Seeker on the Ravenclaw team, meaning she frequently opposed Harry, who was the Gryffindor Seeker.

At one point Ron reached for a book, but Cho reached it first.

"Sorry," he mumbled as he let her take it.

She didn't answer. The silence between them lengthened from one minute to two. Ron stubbornly wanted to stay quiet, but the twitchy uneasiness got to him after a while, so finally he broke down and looked up from the book he'd buried his nose in.

"...Good job in the last round," he said awkwardly. "Your cinnamon rolls...they looked great."

Cho looked up from the book in her hands, taken aback. Her gaze then slid back to the pages. "...Thanks."

Silence fell again. After another few minutes, Cho took a turn to break it.

"...You did...pretty well, too. I don't know what *I* would've done, if I'd only been allowed to use two ingredients."

Ron's ears went pink. "Ah well...I just did what I could..."

Once again the two went quiet, but the discomfort was very, very slowly ebbing away now. The two flipped through several more books, making their own stacks to check out side by side, with Ron towering over Cho's more diminutive frame.

"Did you want to get your cookbooks before the crowds came too?" asked Ron.

“Yeah,” said Cho. “With OWLS and NEWTS coming up, the library just gets so *swamped*...I can never focus when it gets like that.”

“Hermione can’t either,” said Ron with a fond smile. A second later, he realized he shouldn’t have said that (Hermione and Cho got on even less than they did, after the whole D.A. debacle), and he very quickly tried to back-pedal. “I mean – ”

“It’s all right,” Cho cut him off, though the coolness of her tone said otherwise. “She’s one of your best friends – you can’t help but bring her up. Like Harry.”

Ron’s stomach squirmed uncomfortably. Having no idea how to respond, he looked down at his book again, and the awkward silence congealed once more.

After another minute or two, Cho closed the book in her hand with a quiet *snap* and turned to face Ron more fully.

“...Ron...why did you decide to enter the contest?”

The question surprised Ron.

“I’m just curious,” Cho continued thoughtfully. “I’ve been hearing a few things about the others and why they’re in...Arjuna’s been winning cooking competitions since she was five...Bridget’s mum apparently owns her own restaurant, and they’re both sort of struggling to make ends meet...I even heard that Astoria might be trying to rent her own place. I guess I’m wondering...if having something to work hard for plays any role in who succeeds and who doesn’t.”

Ron considered Cho thoughtfully. Then, licking his lips, he took a deep breath.

“Well...I guess I mostly did it for my mum. *She*’s the cook of the family, not me. She’s cooked everything for us – breakfast, lunch, dinner, birthday cakes, Christmas fudge, chocolate Easter eggs – every day, for my entire life.”

“Sounds like she could be a chef herself,” commented Cho with a small smile.

“Yeah!” Ron agreed. “The first thing I thought was how she’d win the contest like *that*, if she could enter. But she can’t, so...I figured I’d do it. She’s wanted to take the whole family to Hell’s Kitchen for ages, but...well...there’d be no way we could afford it,” he finished as an uncomfortable mumble, his eyes falling to the floor.

Cho nodded mutely, taking in Ron’s answer slowly. She glanced back at the bookshelves, her black eyes running absently over the bindings.

“...I want to commission a memorial...for Cedric,” she admitted quietly.

Ron looked up at her, visibly startled. His blue eyes then softened slightly, as he closed his cookbook and slipped it under his arm.

“...The prize money would cover that pretty nicely, huh?”

Cho bowed her head. “Yeah. I want to put it here at Hogwarts...where everyone can see it. Even though I know he’s gone...and it is getting easier, day-by-day, to remember all the wonderful times we had together, and not just focus on the bad...I want everyone else to do the same. I want *everyone* to remember him.”

“You really cared about him, didn’t you?” Ron said quietly.

“Yes.”

Ron bit the inside of his lip, looking deep in thought. Then he offered Cho his best, though still faintly self-conscious smile.

“...I think that’s really cool – what you want to do. I really hope you get to make it.”

Cho smiled slightly in return. “...Thanks, Ron. You know...you’re really quite a nice guy, sometimes – even if you have no taste in Quidditch teams.”

Ron scowled, but it was in pretty good humor all the same. Cho picked up her stack of cookbooks and strolled past him, tossing her long black hair over her shoulder as she went.

“Good luck in the next round,” she called over her shoulder.

“You too!” Ron called back.

Madame Pince abruptly poked her head around the closest bookcase and, glowering fiercely, gave a loud “*SHHHH!*”

Ron winced embarrassedly. “Heh...sorry.”

Not long later, Ron headed back to the common room, holding a stack of about five cookbooks under his arm. He weaved through the students bustling down the corridors, stopping just momentarily to smile at the few people who waved to him or wished him luck in the next round. He’d just climbed onto the staircase that led to the Gryffindor common room when he heard a familiar voice call his name.

“Hey! Ron!”

It was Bridget. She dashed over to greet him, her patched forest green school bag flopping against her side.

“Bridget...hi,” Ron greeted her.

Bridget gave him a big white grin. “Nice job in the last round.”

Ron gave a self-conscious laugh. “Ha – shouldn’t I be saying that to *you*?”

“Oh, sure,” laughed Bridget. “But I think saying it to you is still appropriate – using a Switching Spell with your hardboiled egg was pretty brilliant.”

“I guess,” Ron said self-effacingly, “but come on – using bacon and maple syrup to make breakfast

meatballs? That's the *real* brilliant thing."

Bridget gave Ron a light punch to the arm, smirking broadly. "You *really* need to learn how to take a bloody compliment, Weasley."

Ron laughed a little more fully.

"Anyway, I wanted to talk to you," Bridget said more straightforwardly. "Hannah Abbott and I are organizing a bit of a get-together down in the kitchens tomorrow night so we can swap recipes and practice before the next round. What do you say?"

Ron blinked. "Swap recipes? But...why would you want to help the others? It's a contest."

"Sure...but, as Hannah said, everyone's going to have their own strengths and weaknesses and be given their own challenges to work through. I mean, you had to work with eggs, I had to work with bacon, and some of the others had to work with milk – and I'll bet it'll only get harder and more specialized from there. And honestly, I know I have a lot to learn in the kitchen still, and I figure I might learn something from you all, so why not return the favor? So what do you think? You up for it?"

Ron considered the matter for a moment. There were definitely a lot of really talented chefs in the competition – and if Hannah and Bridget were both willing to share some of what they knew with him even though he'd come close to being eliminated in the last round, it seemed foolish not to accept the offer.

"...All right," he said. "I'm in."

"Great!" said Bridget, her teeth bared again in another bright smile. "Hannah's already gotten Rose and Kevin on board, and I was able to convince Daphne to come too...now all that's left is to chat it up with Cho, Astoria, and Arjuna."

She turned around, waving at Ron over her shoulder as she headed down the stairs. "Meet us down in the kitchens at 7, okay?"

"Okay!" Ron called back.

As Bridget dashed away, he felt a little twitch of excited nerves in his stomach. It might be a bit weird, and a bit intimidating, to work with all of those chefs...but it might be cool to learn more about cooking from more places than just the library. It'd been much more fun to learn how to cook various things in the kitchen with Mrs. Weasley than it was trying to memorize entire cookbooks...

When he reached the common room, Ron found Harry and Hermione already talking in front of the fireplace. He forced the miffed frown that had wound its way onto his face seeing his friends hanging out without him and called over to them, all smiles.

"Hey, Harry! Hermione!"

The two turned to him, their faces lighting up as he sat down in the chair between them.

"There you are!" said Harry. "I was just telling Hermione about my meeting with Dumbledore."

"How'd it go?" Ron asked eagerly, putting his stack of cookbooks down on the side table.

"Well...he's got a job for me to do," said Harry, lowering his voice. "Apparently Slughorn – you know, the new Slytherin judge – taught Tom Riddle at school too, fifty years ago."

Ron's eyes widened. "Whoa."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Slughorn gave Dumbledore one of his memories for his Pensieve...but the problem is, he modified it. He cut it off kind of abruptly, and everything was all blurry and disorienting and weird."

"If he censored it, then it's likely he has something to hide," Hermione surmised. "Something he didn't want Dumbledore to see."

"That's what Dumbledore thinks too. But he told me that while Slughorn's visiting Hogwarts these next two months, I might be able to coax him into talking. Ramsay told me that Slughorn apparently likes to 'collect' kids – anyone he thinks will be successful – so he can mentor them and feed off of their fame...and Dumbledore reckons Slughorn would probably love to collect me, so I

should just...*let* him, and use that to get the real memory.”

Ron brought a hand up to his mouth, considering the matter. “Hmm...maybe I can ask Ramsay when Slughorn and Bagnold are going to be around school...so you can ‘*coincidentally*’ run into Slughorn and start up a conversation.”

“That’s a great idea!” said Hermione. “You could always say you wanted to ask the judges about some of their kitchen experience – I’m sure that would impress Professor Ramsay, you wanting to learn more from the experts...”

“Speaking of which,” said Ron, “there’s gonna be this big get-together in the kitchens tomorrow night, for the student chefs. Bridget and Hannah are organizing it – they figured we could all use the practice before the next round. I don’t really get why they thought we should all cook together, if we’re competing against each other...but I guess I shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, right?”

“Well, there might be reason to question a *Slytherin* invitation,” said Harry skeptically, “but I guess if Hannah’s organizing it too, it’s probably safe.”

“Hey, Bridget’s pretty nice, as Slytherins go,” Ron said defensively. “I heard she’s in the contest trying to earn money for her mum’s restaurant – from the sound of things, the two of them are kind of like Mum and Dad and the rest of us...working to make ends meet.”

“It’s like Ramsay told you, remember, Harry?” Hermione pointed out. “Every student is ‘*full of potential*?’”

“Even Crabbe and Goyle?” Harry asked amusedly.

“...Maybe not *every* student,” granted Ron.

Harry laughed.

Kitchen Practice

Tuesday night Ron parted ways with Harry and Hermione after dinner. They waved to him as he departed down the hall for the kitchens, looking just as uncomfortable with his departure as he was. He wasn't sure if he'd ever be fully comfortable doing so many things without the two of them around...

Ron walked down in the direction of the dungeons, turning down a hallway and coming to a stop in front of a portrait of a fruit bowl. He reached out and tickled the painted pear, and with a loud guffaw, the painting swung open like a door, and Ron stepped into the Hogwarts kitchens.

The stations closest to the doorway were empty – it seemed the house elves had all cleaned them up early, in anticipation for the student chefs using the space. When Ron entered, he immediately picked out some of the other competitors – dark-haired, forebodingly attractive Daphne; curly brown-haired Kevin, with his big, long-lashed brown eyes; tiny Rose, with her brown pigtails and pudgy cheeks; fair-haired, smiling Hannah; and Bridget, who'd tied her black hair up in a tight ballerina-like bun. All of them looked up as he approached.

“Ron, you made it!” said Hannah brightly.

Ron gave an awkward laugh. “Yeah – hey.”

He glanced at the others. The two younger Hufflepuffs gave smiles and waves, but Daphne stared Ron down like he was some cockroach that had just entered the room. He shot her a glare just as sharp in return.

“Where are the Ravenclaws?” asked Ron. “Are they coming?”

“Arjuna said she's already been practicing on her own in the kitchens every morning before sunrise, so she doesn't need any extra help,” Bridget answered, her sleek tone betraying some disdain. “Since Arjuna wasn't interested, Astoria said no too. And Cho had already promised one of her friends that they'd start working on their thirty-page thesis for Defense Against the Dark Arts tonight...honestly, with how rough Snape's been with his NEWT class, I can't say I blame her.”

“She doesn't have to do that homework,” Daphne pointed out coolly. “She gets a pass from it, being in this competition.”

“Yeah, but you know how Ravenclaws are,” Bridget said cynically. “Schoolwork is their religion.”

Daphne smirked too. Hannah smiled disapprovingly at them.

“Oh, come on, you two,” the Hufflepuff prefect said patiently, “that thesis might be due after the competition is over, so maybe Cho wants to get on top of it early. Or she could just be helping out her friend – no one can blame her for that...”

“What about Millicent?” Rose asked innocently.

Ron couldn’t fully bite back a laugh – to his surprise, neither could Daphne.

“Darling...you don’t know Millicent,” Daphne said coolly.

Hannah crossed her arms, her patient face not shifting, as she turned to Rose gently. “Millicent has a bit of a reputation around school – she generally keeps to herself, and she can be a bit...*stand-offish* around people.”

“As in she’ll pummel anyone who so much as looks at her funny,” Ron snorted.

Bridget gave Ron a playful shove. “That’s mostly just the image she puts off, I think. But honestly, I didn’t think she’d accept any help. She’s too proud – and I can understand that. Anyway...” her tone became more straightforward as she gestured to Daphne, “Daphne and I thought it’d be fun to make our own pasta – we’ll have to use the same materials, so that means we’ll have to work together at the start, but then we can branch off on our own and add in our own flavors. Have you made pasta before, Ron?”

“Not from scratch – ” Ron admitted.

He was cut off, however, by the sound of another person entering behind him. The group turned to see Astoria climbing through the portrait hole, looking a little disheveled as she entered the kitchen.

“Astoria!” said Bridget, startled. “I thought you weren’t coming.”

Astoria looked around at everyone, her light blue eyes betraying great discomfort despite her stony face.

“...I hope I’m not intruding,” she said lowly.

Her gaze lingered a little longer on Daphne, who stared her down with just as flinty of an expression.

“Of course not!” said Hannah warmly, and she rushed forward and grabbed Astoria’s hand, pulling her forward. “We’re glad you changed your mind! Come on, we were just about to start on the pasta!”

Hannah pulled Astoria over toward her side of the kitchen, which was opposite to where Daphne and Bridget had already put down their things. Since the final spot in the kitchen seemed to be between Daphne and Kevin, Ron awkwardly stepped up into the space and put down his own schoolbag on the floor, rolling up his sleeves and shooting another distrustful look toward Daphne.

“So the first step,” said Daphne, her tone taking on a much more educational tone as she cracked open an egg and started beating it, “is to make the pasta dough. For that, you’ll need a cup of flour, an egg, and some salt.”

Bridget picked up her cue and grabbed the flour and a measuring cup. Ron fumbled around for a box of salt.

“Put the cup of flour in a bowl and add half a tablespoon of salt,” Daphne instructed.

Once Ron and Bridget were through, Daphne then poured her yellowish egg mixture into it, snatched up the bowl, and started mixing the ingredients all together. It was amazing how ferociously she mixed, despite her apparent lack of strength.

“Bridget, I’ll need a floured surface, once this is done,” barked Daphne.

Not the least bit offended by her blunt orders, Bridget put down some wax paper and lightly dusted it with flour. Daphne meanwhile kept mixing the dough, even though it was clearly becoming difficult for her.

“Once you’ve mixed it...it’ll be really stiff,” Daphne huffed, “so you’ll need a little bit of water, to make it malleable enough to mold – Weasley, get that, will you?”

Frowning slightly at her derisive tone, Ron nonetheless grabbed the measuring cup and dashed to the faucet, filling it halfway with water.

“Just a little,” Daphne warned him, as he raised the measuring cup over the bowl and made to pour some in, “just a little – *stop!* Just that!”

Ron withdrew the cup of water, and Daphne put the mixing bowl down on the counter. She then started taking the dough out of the bowl in both hands, bringing it in pieces down onto the floured countertop.

“Now the most important thing about making pasta,” she dictated, as her hands worked at the dough, “is to do it quickly. If you dawdle, then the pasta dries out.”

She grabbed a rolling pin and started flattening the mound down into a thin sheet. She even once used her wand (which she had skewered neatly through her bun like a hair accessory) to stretch the batter out in mid-air.

“You can either use a roller to smooth it out, or you can use magic to stretch it, like this –*Extendenalata!* Just make sure you flick your wrist and trail it down the dough as it spreads out. Be careful not to stretch it too far, or the dough will break. Depending on the kind of pasta you’re making, you’ll want a different thickness, but for this, I’m doing angel hair, so my sheet will be very long and very thin. From there, you can either stick this in a pasta maker that will cut it up, or you can use magic to do it yourself with a Severing Charm.”

“The Severing Charm’s incantation is *Diffindo*,” another voice quietly cut in.

Daphne shot a fierce glare at Astoria – the younger Greengrass sister’s blue eyes were on Rose, who had looked a little confused.

“I don’t need your help,” Daphne snapped.

Astoria looked up at her sister, her blue eyes faintly wounded despite her otherwise stoic expression.

“She was just explaining it to Rose, Daphne,” Hannah tried to soothe her. “Rose probably hasn’t learned the Severing Charm yet...”

“I can more than cover that on my own,” Daphne cut her off coldly. “If Rose wanted me to explain, then she could’ve asked.”

“Astoria just wanted to help,” Kevin tried to placate Daphne too.

“As I said, I don’t *need* help – especially from her.”

Astoria looked away. Ron recognized something in her posture that he’d only ever seen in one other person before – for a moment, he was reminded of Neville, whenever he had to bite his tongue and endure Draco Malfoy’s bullying. The memory made Ron turn on Daphne with a fierce look.

“What’s your deal?” he demanded.

Daphne turned to him coldly. “*Excuse* me?”

“All she thought to do was give you a hand, and all *you* can think of doing is biting it off,” Ron snapped. “So what if you don’t need help? She was still doing you a favor!”

“She didn’t think I could handle it on my own,” Daphne shot back, her tone contrasting Ron’s by going both quieter and colder.

“She was *being nice*! Not that you *deserve* it, clearly – ”

“Shut it!”

Everyone turned to Astoria. Her blue eyes were blazing as they stared down both Ron and Daphne.

“Clearly I shouldn’t have come at all,” she said quietly. “I’ll go now.”

“No!” Hannah pleaded desperately, even as Astoria grabbed her things. “No, Astoria, don’t do that –”

“Astoria, stop walking and listen to me, or I’ll Leg-Lock you where you stand.”

Everyone turned to Bridget, who had taken her wand out and was pointing it at Astoria. The younger Greengrass stopped, looking back at Bridget with an unreadable expression.

“If you don’t care about winning the competition and getting the prize money, then go on – clear out,” said Bridget, and her quiet, yet clear tone was cutting. “But you’re in *no* place to claim that you can win on your own, when you were in the bottom four last week...”

Bridget then turned to Daphne, her black eyes just as spiteful. “...Something *you* just barely avoided. We all have our reasons for doing this competition – I frankly don’t care to know what *yours* are, but I know we’re all working for something. And I know that each of us has our own strengths. And if you all just bicker and snipe at each other, you’ll be chasing your pride and not what’s in your best interest. I know I need to learn how to cook things with magic, if I’m to survive in this competition. I know Ron needs to learn how to make a perfect pancake. I know *you* wanted to learn how to use a Switching Spell to place one food inside another, Daphne,” she added with a snide smirk.

Ron looked up, surprised, just in time to see Daphne flush.

“I know it’s weird to ask for help from the people we’re competing against,” Bridget said coolly, “but if we all ask each other about the things we need to learn, and we share our knowledge with each other, then we’ll all be a step ahead. You scratch my back, I scratch yours, you know?”

“Right,” Kevin cut in at this point, his tone much lighter and more positive than Bridget’s. “This competition won’t mean anything if we’re not on an equal playing field. I know I’ve cooked longer than some of you...probably less than others too...but I don’t want to win unless I know I’ve really earned it.”

“Me either,” said Hannah softly. Rose nodded in agreement.

Kevin went over to Astoria and brought an arm around her shoulders. “Come on...let’s start rolling out our own dough, eh? You know how to make pasta too, right?”

Astoria’s blue eyes slid from the floor to up at Daphne, who looked back at her with similarly unreadable dark eyes.

“...Yeah,” she said quietly. “I know how.”

Daphne looked away, bringing her gaze back to the pasta dough in front of her.

“All right, then,” Hannah said patiently, “let’s start again! We’ll make a new batch of dough on this side, whisk the eggs, mix the flour and salt...”

As the chefs on the other side started making their own batch of dough as per Daphne’s instructions, Ron turned to the elder Greengrass.

“...You really wanted to learn about how to Switch foods into other ones?”

Daphne kept her back turned and gave a loud huff, trying to obscure her embarrassment.

“It was a clever trick, what you did,” she said moodily. “I figured it’d be a good shortcut in making my chocolate-liqueur lava cake.”

Ron considered this. “...Supplementing the cake center with the chocolate and liqueur filling, so you don’t have to put the cakes together in stages. That’s a cool idea.”

Daphne turned to look at him, her dark eyes rippling with cool scorn.

“Well, if you’d like, I can show you,” Ron said awkwardly. “I mean...it’s really just a standard Switching Spell, honestly...though you have to make sure you can visualize the interior of whatever you’re switching the food into, so that you get everything you want out and not leave any

residue...here, let me show you – ”

He grabbed one of the eggs out of the carton, as well as a fistful of flour. Bridget curiously looked on over Daphne’s shoulder.

“So say I want to put flour into this egg. I visualize the eye yolk in my mind – start with my wand on the flour – then, trailing my wand from the flour to the egg and back in a sharp noose shape, I cast the spell – *Hocest Mutatio!*”

With a flare of white light, the flour vanished. Ron then picked up the egg and with a tap, he emptied its new flour-y contents onto the counter.

“See? Easy.”

Daphne’s expression had cleared slightly, losing some of its condescension. “Not bad, Weasley.”

“Translation – she’s impressed,” Bridget said coolly.

“I did not say that,” Daphne shot back prudishly.

“Of course not – but Gryffindors don’t speak Slytherin. They’re too dim.”

Ron smirked slightly despite himself. “Oh yeah? And yet it was a *Gryffindor* that figured out how to Switch foods into each other, and not the Slytherins.”

“Touché,” Bridget answered with a laugh.

Daphne smiled a bit too.

“...Weasley, do you know how to make a Shepherd’s Pie?”

“Well, sure,” Ron said, blinking in surprise. “Doesn’t everybody?”

“Mother and Father never served Shepherd’s Pie at home,” Daphne said demurely. “They saw it as too *‘low class,’* and discouraged Uncle Hyperion from teaching us how to make it.”

Ron noticed that Astoria had been covertly listening in, but she turned away as soon as she and Ron made eye contact.

“...Well, then,” said Ron placidly, “let’s fix that!”

He turned fully around to face the other side of the kitchen.

“Hey Astoria,” he called over, beckoning her over with a hand, “you want to make a Shepherd’s Pie with us, when you’re done making that pasta dough?”

Astoria looked up at him, startled. She glanced at Daphne, who merely looked away uncomfortably. Then she offered Ron the smallest trace of a smile.

“...Okay.”

Round 2: Pre-Heat

When Harry woke up the next morning, Ron had had a gleam in his eye that Harry hadn't seen since he won Gryffindor their last Quidditch match. At breakfast that morning, Ron told him and Hermione excitedly about all the great things he'd learned. Hannah had taught them all how to change a food's coloring with magic; Daphne and Astoria had shown them how to make pasta from scratch and make a great red wine sauce for a coq au vin; Rose had demonstrated to the others how to safely flambé something; Kevin had helped the others out in how to make a flawless meringue; and Bridget had shared her tips in making croissants so that they were perfectly light and airy.

"And get this – Daphne? She asked me to show her how to make a Shepherd's Pie, since her family never taught her and Astoria how to make one," Ron told Harry and Hermione as they headed down for breakfast, keeping his voice low despite his animated gestures. "So I showed them how to make Mum's recipe, and when we were done, we all tried it, and I swear, Daphne was smiling like a kid at Christmas!"

Harry looked dumbfounded. "Seriously?"

"Yeah!" Ron said with a big grin. "It was crazy! I mean – the Greengrass family has their reputation and all, yeah, but more importantly Daphne's supposed to be buddy-buddy with Pansy Parkinson and that lot. Yet last night, we were actually able to cook together and be sort of nice-like..."

"Well, I suppose since Daphne has a sister in Ravenclaw, she's got to be a little more reasonable than some of the other Slytherins," said Hermione thoughtfully.

Ron shook his head. "No, I don't think so. There's some sort of bad blood between Astoria and Daphne – I saw it when we all first arrived. Don't really get it, but I figure it might be the house thing. I mean, all the Greengrasses have probably been in Slytherin for ages, and they're a pretty dysfunctional lot."

"Like the Malfoys," supposed Harry.

"Yeah, 'cept the Greengrasses were never Death Eaters. I mean, yeah, there was a lot of suspicion around the Malfoys before old Lucius got arrested at the Department of Mysteries, but from what Dad's told me no one's ever been able to confirm that the Greengrasses supported You-Know-Who back in the day. But they still socialize with people who *did* support You-Know-Who, so they're probably just quieter in their support than others."

“It is weird, then,” Hermione said with a frown, “that Daphne and Astoria worked with you that well. I mean, if their parents are friends with Voldemort supporters – ” Ron flinched at the name, but she ignored him, “ – then they’d probably not like your family much, right?”

Once Ron had recovered enough, he nodded in agreement. “...Right. And Bridget and Rose are both Muggle-born too. I had already thought *Astoria* might be different, since she’s a Ravenclaw... but I reckon Daphne doesn’t actually believe in that blood purity crap either...even if she’s weird about expressing it.”

Thanks to Ron talking to Ramsay after Potions class, Harry learned that Slughorn would be arriving one day before each round, mostly to help set up everything for the next set of challenge with the other judges. That Thursday Harry slyly “bumped into” Slughorn and started up a conversation – unfortunately Harry had revealed his hand too early and tried to ask about the memory, and in response Slughorn had withdrawn immediately like a gnome going back into its hole.

“You’ll just have to try again after the next round,” Hermione reassured him.

“Yeah,” said Ron. “You’ve just got to come at it more patiently – I think Slytherins might not be upfront with things very much...unless they’re Bridget.”

Harry didn’t really see how he could be that patient, though, while knowing how much Dumbledore was counting on him to get the real memory. He clearly thought it was very important...that meant he *had* to get it as soon as possible...

Fortunately Harry didn’t have to worry too much about Ron in the next round. His positive attitude endured for the rest of the week, to the extent that when the day of the competition came, he seemed pretty assured of himself.

“I think I’ll be okay,” Ron told Hermione and Harry before he left to meet with the other competitors. “I mean, I’ll never be *fully* prepared, since the judges will want to surprise us...but I think I can figure it out.”

“You know it,” Harry said, grinning from ear to ear as he patted Ron on the back. “Go get ‘em.”

“You’ll do great, Ron,” Hermione added, her cheeks flushing slightly as she put forward as

confident and logical of a voice as she could. “I mean, really, you've *always* done well, when it really counts...”

Ron's face turned a dark crimson, even as his mouth spread into a smile that seemed too big for his face. “...Thanks, Hermione. Well...see you.”

Harry and Hermione waved goodbye to Ron, and he headed off for the dungeons to meet up with the other contestants.

That evening the entire school once again gathered in the stands. Each part of the stadium had their own banners waving – some for their house, some for specific students. Gryffindor had it easy, having only one competitor left in the contest, and so whether they were waving “*Weasley is our King*” or “*Go Go Gryffindor!*” banners, it didn't make much difference. Hufflepuff solely depicted house colors and Hufflepuff slogans on their banners; Ravenclaw, in contrast, was almost exclusively waving banners with the words “*Arjuna is our Ace*” written on them in blue and bronze calligraphy that magically grew and shrank at random. Slytherin had a pretty even swath of banners for all three of their competitors – Harry noticed Pansy Parkinson holding a banner with a blown-up picture of Daphne's face on it, but she seemed to be looking for someone in the stands and was too distracted to hold it up.

“Probably looking for Malfoy,” Hermione said with a faint smirk. “He's been avoiding her almost all year...but from I gather, she's the only person who hasn't gotten the hint...”

Ginny scoffed, her lips also touched with a smirk. “The only living thing in the universe that hasn't, more like. Even a *Pygmy Puff* could tell Malfoy's not interested.”

This got Harry's brain racing. Where *was* Malfoy? Everyone and their mother was here at the competition – it'd be a perfect distraction, if someone wanted to do something away from prying eyes...

Harry almost thought to leave the stands and go get the Marauders' Map from his suitcase back in his dorm room, but at that moment, Ginny grabbed his arm, which drew his attention away.

“Look, here they come!”

The judges strode out onto the field, each one leading their competitors in a line. Dumbledore and Ron's arrival made the entire Gryffindor stands scream themselves hoarse – Ron waved up at

them, his face spread in a grin that made him look a little punch drunk.

“Good morning, everyone!” greeted Ramsay. His voice was warmer than ever, almost jolly. “Welcome to the next round of MagicChef Junior! We’re excited to have you with us!”

Slughorn gave a wide, charming smile to each section of the crowd in turn. “In the last round, we challenged our competitors to serve up their best breakfast cuisine.”

“In this next round,” said Bagnold, her voice misty and serene, “we hope to...switch things up...in an attempt to remind our student chefs to stay on their toes.”

Dumbledore brought a hand down on Ron’s shoulder and smiled; Ron looked up and noticed a wry twinkle in the Headmaster’s blue eye before he looked up to face the crowd.

“In this round,” Dumbledore pronounced, his voice oddly grounded to Harry’s ears, “we’ll be dealing with...Imposters. And I don’t just mean your judges, either.”

All of the student chefs looked up at their respective judges, startled, and the crowd gave a rumbling murmur as Dumbledore, still keeping one hand on Ron’s shoulder, withdrew a large bottle from inside his robes. Inside bubbled a disgusting mud-like potion – one both Harry and Hermione recognized at once as –

“*Polyjuice Potion!*” they burst out in loud unison.

“Yes!” Dumbledore cried, baring his teeth in a wide, confident smile. “Like your dishes, your judges are not what they appear to be! May I introduce Horace Slughorn – ”

The judge everyone had thought was Ramsay gave a little bow from his place between the Hufflepuff chefs.

“ – Millicent Bagnold – ”

The judge who resembled Slughorn smiled around at the crowd over the heads of the Slytherin girls.

“ – Albus Dumbledore – ”

The judge wearing Millicent Bagnold’s face gave an airy wave to the onlookers, while also passing a wry wink to the Ravenclaw girls beside him.

“ – And finally myself,” finished the judge who everyone assumed was Dumbledore, “Gordon Ramsay!”

There was a smattering of polite applause from the crowd. After a few seconds Ramsay talked over them, continuing the introduction.

“In this challenge today, you will find a card at your station that will either instruct you to make a sweet or savory dish. You will then have to make that dish resemble another food that is the opposite. For instance, let’s say you get ‘*sweet*’ and decide you want to make ice cream. You would then have to make that ice cream look like a savory dish – for instance, a baked potato. You will be judged not only on your flavors and creativity, but the *believability* of your dish.”

“You will have 30 minutes to complete this challenge, and the winner will receive a rather *helpful* advantage in the elimination round,” Dumbledore said, tossing some of Bagnold’s curls over his shoulder casually. “Your time starts...now.”

The student chefs all dashed to their stations like horses at a derby, and the crowd at once started cheering slogans and shouting encouragement as the contestants received their cards from their elf partners and got straight to work.

This challenge went infinitely better for Ron than the first one, even though the pace was no less hurried. Like before, Harry kept his Omnioculars squarely on Ron, while Hermione kept her eye on his competition.

“It looks like Kevin’s doing some sort of meatloaf...I think it’s chocolate cake? Hannah is doing a pizza with white chocolate for the cheese and blended strawberries for the tomato sauce – that’s clever...wow, Astoria’s almost done...they look like donuts, but I guess they can’t *really* be donuts...”

Ron took a tall, round cake out of the oven, while also keeping one eye on something that looked like a sauce made of treacle that was cooking on the stove. It took Harry a while to figure out what

he was doing, but by the time Ron had taken out his wand and started to etch a series of light grooves into his cake with a carefully controlled *Incendio* charm, Harry figured it out. He turned to Ginny, his eyes lighting up.

“Ron’s making a – ” he started.

“Yeah!” Ginny cut him off, looking just as excited as Harry.

When the 30 minutes were up, all of the student chefs, their energy once again spent, went up to face the judges one by one. The judges were still disguised as each other, but clearly had gotten tired of it already.

“How in the world do you deal with this *beard*, Dumbledore?” Ramsay asked him irritably, as he tossed the sheet of white hair over his shoulder to get it out of his way. “Such a bloody cumbersome thing...”

“It takes *decades* of practice, my dear Gordon,” Dumbledore replied coolly.

Kevin had made a “meatloaf” that was really a chocolate cake decorated with a red-velvet-cake inspired sauce. Slughorn thought that the red velvet sauce was too sweet and suggested that a strawberry sauce would’ve improved it, but otherwise the judges liked Kevin’s vision and flavors.

Astoria had made “frosted donuts” that were in truth soft pretzels covered in a Jalapeno-cheese sauce that she’d charmed a light pink color. The judges were wowed by how realistic her donuts looked and praised her creativity, though Bagnold suggested that some “sprinkles” made of salt would’ve improved them.

Cho had made an “ice cream sundae,” made of mashed potatoes, beef gravy, and a bacon “cherry” on top. The judges liked her flavor choices, but Ramsay had expressed disappointment by her lack of originality – after all, he had cited ice cream and potatoes before the round had even started.

Rose had made “candy corn” made of three different kinds of cheese and charmed different colors. Although Ramsay applauded her creativity, most of the other judges were not familiar with candy corn (it being a Muggle sweet), and they had wished she’d maybe chosen another candy as her model.

Then it was Ron's turn. When Ron came up before the judges, his heart was racing, but his posture was strong.

"Hello, Ron," greeted Ramsay.

"Hello, Professor Dumbledore," Ron answered back coolly.

The Gryffindor stands burst into laughter. Dumbledore gave Ron a covert wink that looked bizarre on Bagnold's sophisticated face. Ramsay bowed his head, grinning from ear to ear as he tried to suppress his amusement, before he raised his head again after a few seconds, still smiling widely.

"Tell us what you've made for us."

"Well," Ron started with a small smile, "since I didn't make you guys that many pancakes last week...I decided to make you a big stack of them today! This is a vanilla sponge cake with pieces of candied ginger baked inside that looks like a huge stack of American-style savory bacon pancakes, drizzled with a treacle sauce that is supposed to stand in for maple syrup."

By the time Ron was finished, his "pan" cake had gone from Dumbledore to Ramsay to Bagnold to Slughorn. The Slytherin judge, who still resembled Ramsay, took a bite and gave a jovial laugh.

"Well, I must say, my boy – I am *very* impressed! This cake is positively scrumptious."

Bagnold, who was still wearing Slughorn's face, nodded politely as Slughorn helped himself to another few bites. "The cake is wonderfully moist, and your design is quite clever. I particularly like the addition of the candied ginger as your bacon -- very inventive."

"I suspect you ran out of time before you could airbrush or enchant some coloring to the top," supposed Ramsay, "to make it look more golden brown, like the top of a real American pancake?"

"Yes, sir," Ron answered sheepishly. "I guess I took a little too long, carving out each pancake..."

"Perhaps in the future, if you make this again, you can either make the cake a little shorter or just

make the '*pancakes*' about half an inch thicker so you don't have to carve as many...though I suppose if you *do* make this in the future, you likely won't have such a time constraint put upon you," Ramsay added, smirking slightly. "Excellent work overall, Ron – well done."

"Thank you," said Ron.

He went back to his station, his face spread into a huge grin as the Gryffindors sang a rousing chorus of "*Weasley is our King*." As he walked away from the judges, Bridget walked up as if to take his place, and on the way up, she raised a hand into the air beside her. Ron took the cue and gave her a high five as they passed each other, sharing big grins. Most of the students in the stands started mumbling confusedly.

"What's that about...?" muttered Ginny, her eyebrows knitting together suspiciously.

Harry was one of the few completely nonplussed by the action. "Probably just congratulating each other, that's all."

"Yeah, but why?" asked Ginny, still baffled. "I mean...she's a *Slytherin*."

"Ron says Bridget's actually pretty nice, for a *Slytherin*," said Hermione.

"Nice or not, she's his rival in the competition," Ginny persisted, her brown eyes narrowing upon Bridget as the judges looked over her "*cake*," which instead turned out to be a meatloaf covered in garlic mashed potatoes. "And *Slytherins* do whatever they have to in order to win – who's to say she's not playing nice with Ron in the hopes it'll get her the prize?"

Hermione looked down at her lap, her eyebrows knitting together too as she contemplated this. Harry frowned, also feeling unsure of how best to respond. He trusted Ron's judgment...but what if Ginny was right? What if all of this stuff Bridget had done around Ron – being nice to him, inviting him to cook with her and the others – was really just some underhanded trick meant to lure Ron into a false sense of security?

When the judges were finished, they once again discussed the results with each other, before facing the crowd once more.

"Congratulations, student chefs," said Dumbledore. "Your Food Imposters were all very creative,

inventive, and of course...delicious. The dishes that were the most convincing, however, were made by...Hannah – ”

Hannah’s clasped hands came up to rest over her beaming lips.

“ – Astoria – ”

Astoria looked startled and delighted.

“ – Arjuna – ”

Arjuna smiled proudly, her black eyes sparkling.

“ – and Ron.”

Ron looked like he’d been hit over the head with a blunt instrument. His head shot around as he looking around at Dobby and then at the stands, as the Gryffindors once again burst into song – then he looked at the judges, his mouth spread in a huge open-mouthed grin and his blue eyes thrilled.

“Only one chef, of course,” Dumbledore continued, “may receive the advantage in the next round. That chef is...”

Everyone in the stands tensely shifted forward in their seats.

“...Arjuna.”

The Ravensclaws all burst into cheers and applause. Arjuna waved at her supporters, her face touched by a demure smile.

“Arjuna,” Slughorn spoke over the cheers of her classmates, “your dessert kebob had so many different flavors, and you used magic to cook each fruit and cake you used to perfection. Congratulations, my dear.”

Once the cheers had quieted down, Ramsay spoke up.

“Now then...we'll take a ten minute break, at the end of which the Polyjuice Potion's effects should hopefully have completely worn off, and we judges will be ready to initiate the elimination round. Prepare yourselves – this next challenge will be a doozy.”

Round 2: Elimination

When the judges returned (Dumbledore in mauve, Slughorn in midnight blue, Bagnold in lime green, and Ramsay in predictable chef's white), they stood in a line in front of the student chefs. All four of them looked infinitely more relaxed now that they resembled their proper selves again.

"In this competition," stated Ramsay, "you have each had to prove your grit and talent, pulling out all the stops in an attempt to get ahead of your competition. In *this* challenge, however, that will change."

Bagnold stepped forward and raised her wand. In stylistic swirls of wordless magic, she summoned tomatoes and basil leaves and hovered them in two batches in front of her for the crowd to see.

"Individually one can be a unique, marvelous talent," she said, her tone rippling with weight and, in Harry's opinion, a touch too much drama. "But when two talented people are paired together – that's when *true* magic can happen!"

In a tiny explosion of magical fireworks, the ingredients vanished, and with another summoning charm, Bagnold levitated a bowl of streaming tomato soup into the air.

"Today, chefs, you will be tested," she proclaimed with a wide smile that was stunning from all angles, "by being partnered off in pairs of two and, as a team, having to make a delicious enchanted entrée for us! This entrée can be anything you like, but you must include some sort of magic in it – whether a potion or an enchantment – that creates some sort of a magical effect on the judges. This special variation of tomato and basil soup, for example, I infuse with a Sleeping Enchantment, so as to help my grandchildren get to sleep when they're sick in bed."

"To keep this challenge from being too...*easy*, of course," Dumbledore said wryly, his blue eyes twinkling, "you will have to team up with someone who is *not* from your house...and at the end of this round, the weakest of the pairs will be eliminated."

The stands at once started mumbling in concern. Ron noticed, however, that only the competitors who had not met in the kitchens Monday night – Cho, Arjuna, and Millicent – seemed anxious.

"Arjuna m'dear," said Slughorn, "since you won the advantage in the last round, *you* will get to assign the teams."

Now it was Ron's turn to be nervous. Arjuna, from the start, had been a pretty threatening opponent. She'd only lost the first preheat challenge by a hair and had won both of the other challenges easily, receiving nothing but enthusiastic praise from all of the judges. Plus Cho said she'd won, like, four blue ribbons before even coming to Hogwarts, right? On top of that, Ron knew Ravenclaws were, by and large, *very* competitive. Whenever Gryffindor had faced Ravenclaw in Quidditch, Ravenclaw's players always flew as nimbly and strategically as a professional team.

Arjuna glanced around at the other chefs with her eyes narrowed thoughtfully, clearly sizing up her competition. Then she spoke with methodical calm.

"...Astoria with Kevin..."

Astoria and Kevin exchanged a small smile.

"Cho with Daphne..."

Cho hesitantly glanced at Daphne, who returned her gaze with an icy, distrustful stare.

"Bridget with..."

Ron tensed up, hoping beyond hope –

"...Rose..."

Ron's shoulders dropped. Rose smiled brightly at Bridget, who gave her a small wry smile in return – Ron, however, noticed that Bridget's eyes also flickered coolly toward Arjuna.

"...And Ron with Millicent."

Ron felt like his stomach had fallen out of his chest. The Gryffindor and Slytherin stands all immediately started booing and screaming angrily.

“What a cheat!” Ginny yelled, her cheeks flushing a furious red. “‘*Arjuna the Ace*,’ yeah, right – more like Arjuna the Ass – !”

Unfortunately Ginny was sitting next to Luna, and therefore the Ravenclaw stands, so her outburst was shouted down by a bunch of Ravenclaws who were holding an “*Arjuna is our Ace*” banner close by.

Gaping, Ron shot his gaze over to Millicent. She looked almost more appalled than he was – although her mouth was closed, her brown eyes rather resembled those of a deer in the headlights...if that deer was also carrying an AK-47 and prepared to go on a rampage.

“That leaves Hannah as my partner,” Arjuna finished smoothly, clearly unfazed by the Gryffindor and Slytherin outbursts.

“Very good,” Bagnold said in satisfaction. “Teams, please move to one of the five front stations.”

Ron shot Bridget an uneasy look, before he walked over to the station just in front of where he usually worked. Millicent lumbered over to stand at his side, though they both worked to keep a healthy berth between them.

“Now that the teams are decided,” said Dumbledore, “there’s one last thing we must add.”

With a wave of his wand, he materialized a set of golden chains and cuffs on each of the competitor’s ankles that connected them to their partner. All of the chefs – even Kevin and Astoria, who’d looked rather pleased with their match-up – flinched in response.

“This will ensure that you must work *together*, during this challenge,” Dumbledore said with amused satisfaction.

“You will have 90 minutes to make your enchanted entrée,” said Ramsay. “Your time starts... now!”

Kevin and Astoria, Hannah and Arjuna, and Rose and Bridget got to work right away. Cho and Daphne started a little more hesitantly, with Cho trying to reach out to Daphne and Daphne reluctantly going along with her. In Ron and Millicent’s case, however, Ron was startled when Millicent immediately shot forward toward the station countertop with no warning, yanking him

along after her.

“H-*hey!*” he yelped in a mixture of pain and anger.

“Pick up your feet,” Millicent snapped back at him. “We only have 90 minutes, and I’m *not* going to let you blow this for me – ”

Ron yanked the chain back with all his strength, making her stumble backward.

“Whoa, horsie,” he retorted coldly. “We can’t get to work if we don’t have a game plan. We haven’t even figured out what we’re *making!*”

Millicent whirled on him, her tiny brown eyes flashing. “*You* haven’t figured out what we’re making. I know *exactly* what I’m doing – so just let me do it, and we’ll both get through this.”

Ron gave a bark-like laugh. “Oh yeah, *that* sounds right! Just sit back and *silently entrust you* with my place in the contest? As if I’m going to do that!”

“I have no time to *hold your hand*, Weasley!”

“Good! Can’t imagine who’d want to hold *your* hand – ”

Millicent seized Ron by the collar, raising a fist as if to punch him full on in the face.

“Master Weasley!”

“Miss Millicent!”

Winky and Dobby both placed themselves in between their student chefs, putting their long-fingered hands up defensively.

“Please, *please* don’t fight, Miss Millicent!” Winky whimpered.

“Master Weasley can’t finish the challenge, if he’s fighting!” squeaked Dobby. “And if Master Weasley doesn’t have a dish, then Master Weasley will lose the challenge!”

Ron and Millicent glared at each other with pure hatred, flaring blue on fearsome brown. Then, slowly, reluctantly, Millicent released Ron’s collar, though her hand still stayed threateningly close to his throat as if she was still itching to choke him.

“...We’re making a Potato, Celery, and Shallots Soup,” she said very lowly. Her tone seemed to dare Ron to argue.

Ron gave a curt, distrustful nod. “Okay. And the magical element?”

“I’ll figure that out later,” Millicent said dismissively, as she turned back to the station and started filling a pot with olive oil.

“No,” Ron said firmly. “We’re figuring it out *now*. If we’re adding in a charm, then we’ll have to fold the spell into the soup while we’re mixing it – Hannah taught us that, when she showed us how to change the color of liquids...”

“Then we’ll use a potion,” Millicent said coolly. She kept her gaze firmly on her pot of olive oil, which she’d put on the stove so that it could boil.

“...Okay,” Ron granted, his tone still twitching with irritation.

Dobby and Winky reappeared with armfuls of potatoes, celery, and shallots. Ron grabbed some potatoes and started chopping them up. The flurry of action helped him work out enough of his aggression that he could talk a little more levelly.

“...How about we add in a Calming Draught?” he asked in a hard, brooding tone, as he continued to quickly cut up the potatoes. “That’d be a good effect for a soup to have.”

“The asphodel would react badly with the shallots,” Millicent answered seriously.

“Really?” Ron asked, startled.

“Onion-like plants don’t go with asphodel – they die instantly upon even the slightest contact. One time our house elf Lowry made the mistake of planting onions next to asphodel in Mother’s garden, and they all turned horribly black and rotten.”

“Yikes. No Calming Draught, then.”

Millicent nodded curtly. The two worked silently for a moment, with Millicent preparing the shallots and Ron cutting up celery and potatoes. Dobby and Winky watched them nervously, waiting on tenterhooks for any more requests.

“Though...” Millicent murmured, her hard tone becoming a little mistier when it was quietly hovering in the back of her throat, “we could substitute a Pepper-Up Potion.”

“Yeah...” Ron said slowly. “Yeah, that’d work! I mean, plenty of people drink soup when they’re sick – Bagnold mentioned it herself – ”

“And it’s not like we’d be taking her idea,” Millicent interjected thoughtfully. “We *are* using a different approach – ”

“I’ve got it!” Ron said excitedly. “Why don’t we add red peppers to the soup too? Then we can have a Red Pepper soup – ”

“ – With Pepper-Up Potion in it,” Millicent finished, her eyes widening.

“Right!”

Millicent’s small brown eyes actually lit up as she considered this. “...That’s actually a really good idea.”

“Curb your surprise, will you?” said Ron sarcastically.

Millicent's eyes narrowed, though this time they had something almost like good humor in them. "All right – Weasley, why don't you handle mixing in the ingredients, while I get to work brewing the Potion?"

"Sounds good," said Ron.

He turned to Dobby. "Can you get us a small cauldron?"

"Right away, Master Weasley!" Dobby said, beaming from ear to ear as he disappeared with a *crack*.

Millicent also turned to Winky. "Winky...could you bring me beetle eyes, dandelion root, ground alietotsy, and a vial of honeywater from Professor Snape's storeroom, please?"

"Yes, Miss Millicent!" Winky answered dutifully. "Of course!"

"Only if Professor Snape allows you to!" Millicent said forcefully before Winky could disappear too. "Before you go to the cupboard, go find him in the stands and tell him that Millicent needs these things for her dish. *Only* get the materials if he says yes – you understand?"

Winky nodded. "Yes, miss!"

With that, she disappeared with a *crack*.

Ron glanced at Millicent, confused. "What, you don't think Snape will let you use whatever you want?"

Millicent scoffed. "Of course he will."

Ron frowned. Then a thought struck him, and his blue eyes slowly widened.

“...You just don’t want Winky to get in trouble for taking things without asking.”

Millicent shrugged, acting as flippant as she could. “House elves get punished for stupid things – better for them to ask permission for something they know they can have than to presume they can just take it.”

Ron considered Millicent for a minute. Then, after a short silence, he offered her a small, wry smile.

“...Hey, Millicent?”

“What?”

“If we make it through this round...remind me to tell you about S.P.E.W.”

Once Winky came back with the potion materials and Dobby came back with the cauldron, Millicent and Ron plowed right in, and the round soon rushed by. Millicent and Ron finished their soup about a minute before time was up, and so were able to pour it into four separate bowls for the judges and add cheese and cilantro for decoration.

Rose and Bridget were up first. They had made a pork pie infused with a Cheering Charm. Unfortunately the Cheering Charm ended up reacting badly with the pork filling, making it overly chewy and moist. The Charm’s effects came through, but at the cost of the textures and flavors. Ramsay also noted that Rose and Bridget had had some trouble working together as well – Rose, being much more impulsive and excitable, was put at odds with Bridget, who was more methodical and thoughtful. They came together pretty well despite their opposite approaches and their lack of magical cooking knowledge, but those things clearly hurt their finished product.

‘That’s why Arjuna put Bridget with Rose,’ Ron realized. ‘They’re both Muggle-borns, and Rose is only in second year. Of course they’d be at a disadvantage, having to make a magical entrée together.’

Astoria and Kevin were next. They had made a cinnamon-spiced beef stroganoff imbued with a Silencing Charm – in Astoria’s words, they’d wanted to “leave the judges speechless” with their dish. The Charm worked beautifully and forced the four judges to respond by writing words in the air over their heads with their wands. Bagnold praised the mix of sweet and savory flavors in their dish, though she admitted she couldn’t see much appeal to a Silencing Charm in a fine dish,

excluding the potential humor. Ramsay praised Kevin and Astoria's teamwork in how they married their sensibilities – Astoria favoring savory flavors and Kevin preferring sweet ones – together in one cohesive dish.

Then it was Millicent and Ron's turn. When the two walked up together, the chains still linking them by the ankles, Ron had to purposefully shrink his steps so that the shorter, rounder Millicent could keep up with him more easily.

"Hello, Ron, Millicent," greeted Dumbledore pleasantly.

"Hi, Professor," said Ron. Millicent inclined her head politely.

"Can you tell us what you've made for us, please?"

Ron glanced at Millicent out the corner of his eye. Millicent nodded, giving him silent permission to answer.

"...We've made you...a '*Red Pepper-Up Potion Soup*.' It's made of red peppers, potatoes, celery, and shallots, with Pepper-Up Potion mixed in and decorated with grated Parmesan cheese and cilantro."

As the judges each tried the soup in turn, they licked their lips...and one by one, each judge suddenly found steam coming out of their ears.

"Who made the Pepper-Up Potion?" Slughorn asked eagerly, looking perfectly thrilled by the steam coming out of his head. "These steam clouds are some of the prettiest I've seen in years!"

Ron grinned at Millicent. She didn't answer, instead just bowing her head, but Slughorn took it in stride.

"Superb work!" he said, clapping his hands. "*Masterful* Potion-making!"

"You should be very proud of yourself, Millicent," Ramsay agreed. "And Ron, I thought I heard you suggest the red peppers?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Very clever,” said Ramsay. “Unfortunately the soup itself is a little thin – I think when you’re adding something like Pepper-Up Potion to a soup like this, you have to compensate the thinning quality of the sunflower root by adding in about a cup more of milk. I also noticed,” he brought his folded hands down on the table and leaned forward slightly, examining Millicent and Ron critically, “a lot of turmoil at your station. May I know what the issue was?”

Ron opened his mouth but faltered, not quite sure how to explain. To his surprise, Millicent stepped in.

“I’ve always cooked on my own. I’ve always done my own thing, my own way...and I didn’t really want any help.”

“That’s not a beneficial attitude, whether you’re a chef or not,” Ramsay stated seriously. “While I often like cooking my own recipes in my own way, I have cooked more than long enough to know how valuable an extra set of hands and an extra brain can be in the kitchen – and the same goes for everything else. Independence is good – but isolation is not.”

Millicent did not verbally reply, though Ron noticed, despite the feigned indifference on her face, how misty her brown eyes looked. She was definitely thinking, even if she didn’t know what to say.

“...I probably wasn’t helping much either,” Ron interjected. “I was sort of raring for a fight at the start...even though it was stupid.”

Millicent glanced at Ron out the corner of her eye, her expression unreadable. Bagnold smiled slightly.

“It’s good that you are aware of your own shortcomings,” Bagnold said kindly. “And of course, you two did pull together, in the end...that is really what matters. Well done.”

“Thank you,” Ron and Millicent murmured in broken unison.

They headed back to their station, the chains around their ankles disappearing as they went.

“You didn’t have to say those things,” Millicent said under her breath.

“No,” Ron said casually. “But I wanted to.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t like the thought of you getting all the blame, I guess.”

“So you did it to make yourself feel better?” asked Millicent.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Ron mumbled, frowning reproachfully at her. “Are you really *that* upset that I tried to be nice for a change?”

“No,” Millicent answered coolly. Her brown eyes actually softened slightly despite the lack of the smile on her face. “I can see why you and Bridget get along, though – she also has that inclination to be nice to people who’ve shown her no kindness whatsoever.”

Ron smirked slightly. “Well...it’s a little easier when you find out those people are decent enough, under all their stupid playacting.”

“I believe the word you’re looking for is *‘bullshit,’*” Millicent said darkly, though her eyes twinkled with something like amusement.

Once the judges were finished looking over the dishes, they discussed the results. It took them a little longer than usual; it seemed Ramsay was in disagreement with the other three about something. When the four faced the crowd, Ramsay still didn’t look that happy.

“Well done, chefs,” said Bagnold, smiling warmly around at the stands. The camera of the Daily Prophet reporter flashed a few times on her, yet she didn’t flinch once. “All of you have performed admirably...but today, one team stood above the rest. That team is...Arjuna and Hannah!”

“Arjuna *again*,” grumbled Ginny, as the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs both cheered. “I’m really getting sick of her...”

“I told you she was good,” Luna said dreamily. “There’s no sense in getting mad about someone being good in the field she’s competing in...”

“Your roast chicken with coconut chutney was a *delicious* meeting of the minds,” said Slughorn warmly. “Your Elixir to Induce Euphoria complimented your food beautifully, and your chutney in particular looked like something out of a professional cookbook!”

“That’s because it probably is,” Millicent muttered under her breath.

Ron turned to her. “Huh?”

“I know that dish – Ramsay put his own variation of coconut chutney in one of his cookbooks. I bet Arjuna used that *exact* recipe.”

Ron looked from Arjuna to Ramsay. “...No, that doesn’t make sense – I mean...Ramsay couldn’t be that cross if Arjuna used *his* recipe, right?”

“He could be if he thinks she didn’t put in as much thought into her dish as the rest of us did,” Millicent said lowly. “It’s like he said in Potions class – textbooks are a crutch for real hard work.”

Ron’s eyes again drifted from Arjuna to Ramsay. Ramsay caught Ron’s eye, and his irritated expression cleared up at once, fading away into a small smile. Ron smiled back awkwardly.

‘I wonder if he’d wanted to vote for Millicent and me,’ he thought. ‘Though I guess he might have liked Astoria and Kevin, too...’

“The other teams safe this week,” said Slughorn, “are Astoria and Kevin...and Ron and Millicent.”

All four chefs exhaled in immense relief.

“That leaves,” said Dumbledore, “Daphne, Cho, Bridget, and Rose. Please step forward.”

All four girls broke apart from the others, leaving their stations and coming up to the front. Rose was the worst off of the four – she’d started shaking. Cho had gone very white. The two Slytherins, however, remained stoic.

“Daphne and Cho. Your chocolate soufflé mixed with a Beauty Spell had conflicting flavors and a spell that was only mixed partway through. Your teamwork was also lacking, with one relinquishing the reins almost instantly to the other and constructive criticism giving way to bitterness.

“Bridget and Rose. Your pork pie infused with a Cheering Charm, although magically effective, was runny and chewy to the point of being unappetizing. Your inexperience in cooking with magic was a great hindrance, as were your opposite styles in the kitchen.”

Ron looked around at the student chefs facing elimination, feeling terrible. He didn’t want any of them to be cut – *all* of them deserved to stay...

Dumbledore looked around at all four girls solemnly. “The chefs who will be leaving the competition today are...”

The students in the stands all held their breath. Rose started to tremble.

“...Cho and Daphne.”

Rose collapsed onto her knees in utter relief. Cho closed her eyes and bowed her head, hiding her face in her hands. Bridget immediately turned to Daphne, who had barely reacted to the announcement, and wrapped an arm around her. Daphne tilted her head down so that her long brown hair fell into her eyes and no one could see her expression.

“Ravenclaw, Slytherin,” said Dumbledore, “please applaud your student chefs.”

A polite round of applause made its way through the stands. Arjuna clapped quietly; Hannah, Kevin, and Astoria tried to clap along too, but they clearly were not comforted at all by the gesture. His heart swelling with empathy and sorrow, Ron strode forward, leaving Millicent behind at their station. He walked right over to Cho and brought a hand onto her shoulder. Cho looked up just in time for him to give her a big hug.

“I’m really sorry,” he told her quietly.

Cho’s eyes filled up with tears and, to the surprise of all the Ravenclaws in the stands, she brought her arms around Ron’s neck and hugged him back.

“I won’t stop fighting,” she said lowly. “I will get it put up one day – somehow.”

Ron pulled away, offering her a small smile. “I’m glad.”

He then turned to Daphne, who’d looked up in some surprise when he’d hugged Cho.

“You probably don’t want a hug too,” Ron surmised good-naturedly.

“No,” said Daphne.

But through the small traces of tears in her eyes she was smiling.

Sherbet Lemons

After the second round, the rivalry between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor became a little more intense. Harry was reminded of his time during the Triwizard Tournament when he noticed people wearing buttons saying “*Weasley is Our King*” or “*Arjuna and Astoria are our Aces*” in the hallways. With Astoria’s success in the last round, all of the Ravenclaws had gathered around to support her just as much as they had Arjuna...but Astoria was not particularly enthused. The day after the second round, Ron noticed Astoria throwing one of the “Arjuna and Astoria” buttons in the trash with a look of great bitterness stamped on her face – unfortunately Ron had been unable to catch her before she’d dashed down the hall toward the Charms classroom.

On Monday morning, Astoria’s feelings on Ravenclaw’s shift in approval came to full light when she and Arjuna got into a big argument in the Great Hall. It had all started when a first year Ravenclaw boy asked Arjuna and Astoria for their autographs. Arjuna indulged the star-struck boy, but Astoria dismissed him.

“I have no interest in being anyone’s celebrity,” she’d told the boy lowly. “Now run along.”

The boy, looking quite hurt, slunk off toward the other end of the Ravenclaw table, his head down.

Arjuna frowned at Astoria. “Stori, you should’ve just given it to him. It’s not a big deal.”

“He only wanted my autograph because I did well in the last round,” Astoria replied coldly.

“He wanted your autograph because he *supports* you,” Arjuna corrected.

“Because I did well in the last round. Who supported me after the first round, huh? No one.”

“*I* supported you,” Arjuna said quietly.

Astoria’s face stayed blank, but her light blue eyes flashed. “Oh really.”

“Yes, *really*!” Arjuna shot back, flabbergasted by Astoria’s tone. “I’ve always wanted you to do well! I was really glad that they kept you – I mean, honestly, you were the only one who really

deserved to stay – ”

“*Deserved* to stay?” Astoria cut her off harshly. “What do *you* know about ‘*deserving*’ to stay?”

Astoria’s voice had risen enough that people were starting to listen in.

“Cho had wanted to build a monument for Cedric!” Astoria snapped. “She told me after the round that she was going to use the prize money to pay for it. Bridget is trying to help her mother’s restaurant! And I’m trying to get out of my parents’ house before it’s too late!”

“Stori – ” Arjuna started, but Astoria cut her off.

“What do *you* have to fight for!? All you want in this competition is to win! You don’t know *anything* about who *deserves* to win!”

Arjuna’s mouth had fallen open as she listened to Astoria rattle on. By the time Astoria was done, her eyes had narrowed sharply.

“This is a *contest*, Astoria,” she retorted. By now, everyone had quieted down to listen. “This isn’t some morality play where the noblest motivation wins. It’s about *talent* – and I’ve loved cooking since I was a kid! You *know* how excited I was when I heard Professor Ramsay was going to teach us!”

“It’s no skin off your nose if you lose,” Astoria shot back.

Arjuna’s face started to flush in anger. “It’s no skin off *anyone’s* nose! Who says Cho can’t still get that statue built without the prize money, or Bridget can’t help her mother, or you can’t get your apartment?”

“Some of us don’t have time to wait!”

“*Time!*?” repeated Arjuna. Her voice had started to rise too. “What, are you suddenly looking into the future too, Miss ‘*I Follow Things in the Real World?*’”

“I *am* following things in the real world!” yelled Astoria. “Thirteen Muggles killed in one summer! Three more killed this month! Katie Bell getting cursed in Hogsmeade! Things are getting worse!”

“It’s always darkest before sunrise, and you don’t know when that sunrise will be – or even if things are not *already* the worst they’re going to be!”

“I’m not going to take that chance! Go ahead and play around in this contest like it’s some petty Quidditch match if you want, but this is *important* to me!”

Arjuna’s eyes widened in a kind of fury that could’ve made Lord Voldemort himself shudder.

“...How...*dare* you try to put me down just because I don’t have some sappy soap opera reason for doing this competition? *You need to get out of your parents’ house before it’s too late?* Too late for *what?! Your parents aren’t Death Eaters – you’ve told me they’ve never been Death Eaters!* They’re not abusive – they don’t hit you or neglect you or demean you – you’ve *told* me that! Sure, they’ve been a little *distant*, but that’s not the end of the world! And even if you *do* have it in your head that everything is going to go to Hell in a hand basket, what do *you* have to fear? *YOU’RE A PUREBLOOD!*”

Arjuna’s tirade had sideswiped Astoria completely. It was clear that Arjuna had never lost her temper like this before, since not only had Astoria gone very pale, but also her light blue eyes had started filling up with tears. Arjuna noticed the tears right away, and her fearsome anger flickered and died. She reached a hand out to her friend.

“Stori – ”

But Astoria didn’t want to hear it. Grabbing her schoolbag, she ran out of the Great Hall, leaving Arjuna alone at the Ravenclaw table.

Astoria stowed away in an unused classroom, hiding under one of the desks out of view of any of the windows in a crumpled-up ball. She didn’t hold back her tears – but she still refused to let anyone see them.

Or, at least, she *had* refused to let anyone see them, until the door to the unused classroom opened and a familiar voice echoed through the room.

“Astoria?”

It was Kevin.

Astoria looked up just in time for Kevin to catch sight of her. His eyes widening slightly, he immediately closed the door and quietly walked over to her. He slowly bent down beside her, his brown eyes very gentle.

“...Are you okay?”

Astoria looked down at the floor and shook her head mutely. She just couldn’t summon any words, given how difficult it was for her to simply choke back her sobs.

His eyes rippling sadly, Kevin eased himself down onto the floor so he could sit beside her, placing his shoulder right beside hers. He was quiet for a moment, clearly considering his words carefully. Then he turned to Astoria.

“...Would you like a sherbet lemon?”

Astoria looked up at him through her tears, startled. “What?”

“A sherbet lemon,” Kevin repeated.

He took a handful of wrapped yellow candies out of a pocket inside his robes.

“It’s a Muggle sweet,” he explained with a faintly awkward smile. “My parents always eat one whenever they’re feeling mad or upset.”

Astoria looked down at the candies, up at Kevin’s face, and back. Then she slowly took one, unwrapped it, and popped it in her mouth. The sourness immediately hit her, making her pucker her lips.

Kevin gave a quiet laugh. “They are sour, aren’t they?”

“Yeah,” Astoria murmured uncomfortably through her puckering lips.

Kevin smiled softly, as his eyes glided away to rest on the wall ahead of them. “That’s why Mum and Dad eat them. Dad started it – whenever he and Mum would get in an argument, he would go into the loo, find a mirror, and eat a sherbet lemon. The look on his face while he was eating it would look so silly that he’d be able to calm down and forget whatever he was angry about...”

Several students passed by the window of the classroom, unaware of Kevin and Astoria hiding inside, and their shadows passed over Kevin and Astoria’s faces as they went.

“...Mum and Dad have been eating a lot of them, lately.”

Astoria looked up at Kevin. His warm, charming face had suddenly become a lot less happy and more brooding – it was actually sort of a bizarre expression for Kevin to wear.

“Why?” asked Astoria.

Kevin adjusted himself in his place on the floor, leaning up against the leg of the desk.

“My mum works in the Auror department,” he explained, “and my dad’s a bobby – that’s like a Muggle Auror. They’ve both been really scared about the War...about our family’s safety, about... each other. Mum’s been trying to tell Dad to leave the force...maybe go into hiding with me, while she continues the fight at home...but Dad’s refused. He knows he can’t leave his friends at work to deal with things alone, particularly since they don’t know what’s happening, and he does. And of course it’s just as dangerous for Mum to stay as it is for Dad – having magic only does so much to keep you safe, really...especially if you’re an Auror, and you’re on the front lines...”

Kevin turned to Astoria. His lips were tugged up in a weak smile, even though his eyes were rippling sadly.

“...That’s why I entered the contest, see? I’ve been writing to Mum and Dad about it – telling them about all the great things I’ve learned and the new friends I’ve made – so that they can focus on something good, around all the bad they’ve got to deal with at home. It’s not much...but it’s all I can do.”

Astoria instantly felt guilty. She'd gone on and on about how her motivation had been so much better than Arjuna, who simply wanted to win the contest because she loved cooking. By those standards, Kevin's motivation wouldn't have been as important either...but it clearly meant a lot to him, all the same.

Astoria wasn't quite sure how to express these feelings, but judging by the soft look on Kevin's face, she almost felt like she didn't have to. Kevin leaned his shoulder up against Astoria's and offered her another sherbet lemon.

"Here – let's have one more each, and then we can head out, eh?"

Astoria attempted a weak smile of her own and with a small nod she took another piece of candy. She and Kevin both ate their pieces and giggled amongst themselves at the silly, puckered looks on each other's faces, before Kevin helped Astoria to her feet and they headed out of the room together.

Astoria headed up to the Ravenclaw commonroom, ignoring the side-glances and whispers of the people in the halls on the way. When she reached it, she found who she was looking for in their dorm, sitting on her bed with her crystal ball in her lap.

At the sight of Astoria, Arjuna bolted up, barely catching her crystal ball before it fell to the floor and shattered. Her hands clutched at the ball in her hands as she turned to Astoria, her black eyes rippling pitifully.

"Astoria, I – "

Astoria didn't give her the chance to finish. She descended upon her friend with a swoop, wrapping both of her arms around her neck and hugging her tightly.

"I'm really sorry," she mumbled under her breath.

Arjuna's eyes rippled with upset too as she put the crystal ball down on the bed and clung to Astoria in return. "No, *I'm* sorry – I wasn't thinking about your feelings or...what you thought about the others. I know you've gotten around to liking most of them, after they helped you out in the kitchen..."

“But you were right,” Astoria dissented. “My reasoning *isn’t* more important than yours, or anyone else’s...”

Arjuna pulled away, her lips tugged up in a soft smile.

“I’d always had it in my head,” she confessed, “that we’d make it all the way to the end together – the two of us. I dreamed that we’d push each other to our limit, doing everything we could to win – and that Ravenclaw house would be able to celebrate having the two best student chefs in the world! And in the end...it wouldn’t matter who won – because we would’ve worked our very hardest, and we would’ve supported each other regardless...”

Astoria smiled, touched by the emotion in Arjuna’s voice. Arjuna gave a soft laugh under her breath.

“I know that doesn’t sound like much.”

“I think it’s wonderful,” Astoria said softly.

She put her schoolbag down on her bed, removing the two cookbooks she’d checked out of the library the previous day.

“Would you like to go over some recipes this afternoon?”

“Sure,” said Arjuna. “Are you planning on going down to the kitchens again tonight?”

“Yeah – do you want to come?”

“Nah,” Arjuna shook her head lightly. “I think I’m okay.”

“They’re really very nice,” Astoria said encouragingly. “Sure, Ron’s a bit rough around the edges, but he still taught Daphne and me how to make a Shepherd’s Pie.”

“That *was* very nice of him,” Arjuna agreed. “But really, I’ll be all right – I wrote to Mama and Papa and they were able to send me a whole bunch of new recipes. I can’t wait to use them!”

Despite her faint disappointment, Astoria let it slide. Arjuna had always been a rather independent person, just like she was – it often took a lot to make her ask for help.

“Okay...if you say so.”

Arjuna picked up one of Astoria’s cookbooks and opened it so that they could read the recipes together. “Here, let’s start with Chicken Tikka Marsala – just let me know when you’re ready to turn the page.”

Mandrake Leaves

Potions class that Monday afternoon went pretty well. Ramsay praised Harry for his Wiggensweld Potion (which Harry once again got some help with, thanks to the Half-Blood Prince), and on Ron's suggestion, Harry took the opportunity to talk with Ramsay after class was over about Slughorn, in the hopes that Ramsay might give him some insight on how to butter him up for information.

Ron and Hermione were waiting outside the Potions classroom when, to their surprise, they saw Professor Sprout striding down the hall right toward Ramsay's classroom.

"Miss Granger – Mr. Weasley," she greeted politely, but otherwise did not acknowledge them as she opened the door to Ramsay's classroom. "Gordon, I need to speak with you – immediately, please."

Harry and Ramsay both looked startled. Ramsay, recovering first, turned to Harry.

"Horace will be back again this upcoming Thursday," he said gently. "I'm sure you'll be able to speak to him then."

"...Thank you, sir," said Harry, glancing back at Professor Sprout out the corner of his eye.

Ramsay noticed his divided attention and added rather firmly, "Now run along – you won't want to miss the feast."

Harry gave a weak nod, before obediently turning around and walking out of the room. Sprout closed the door sharply behind him – rather than heading to the feast, however, Harry, Ron, and Hermione all hung back in unison to listen in at the door.

"It's happened again, Gordon," Sprout's concerned voice came muffled through the doorway. "Five more Mandrake leaves, taken right off the plant. This wasn't some accident – someone actively *stole* them from greenhouse three – likely when everyone was at the stadium watching your contest..."

Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione, who both looked baffled. Ramsay didn't reply, so Sprout pressed on.

“I’ve already informed Albus about the matter...but I want every teacher to be on the look-out for any student exhibiting the behavior ascribed to the enchantment – ”

“Pomona, it might not have been a student,” argued Ramsay. “They wouldn’t know what to use mandrake leaves *for* – that’s *highly* advanced magic. Even the potions requiring mandrake leaves are well above N.E.W.T. level. It could have been some member of the staff – plenty of them didn’t come to the last round of the contest – ”

“No professor would steal from my greenhouses,” Sprout cut him off solemnly.

“I’m just saying it’s *possible*, Pomona,” Ramsay said calmly. “But I will look out for it, all the same.”

“Thank you. I’ll also be locking the greenhouses up nice and tight at night, just to be safe.”

Footsteps echoed on the floor of the classroom, coming back toward the door. Harry, Ron, and Hermione all quickly ran to hide behind the corridor as Sprout left the room and headed back up the stairs. Glancing at Ron and Hermione significantly, Harry quickly took his Invisibility Cloak out from his schoolbag and the three huddled under it so that they could head past the open classroom door and up the stairs without being noticed by Ramsay. When they reached the landing at the top of the stairs, they removed it, and started walking toward the Great Hall together.

“What was *that* about?” muttered Ron.

“It must’ve been Malfoy,” Harry said at once.

Hermione looked exasperated. “Harry – ”

“Think about it! He wasn’t there at the last round – the contest would’ve been the *perfect* distraction for him and go and take those Mandrake leaves – ”

“*Harry*,” growled Hermione. “*Plenty* of people weren’t at the last round – Professor Ramsay said so himself!”

“The only question is,” Harry pressed on, undeterred, “what could Malfoy want Mandrake leaves for?”

“Maybe for some sort of healing tonic?” Ron suggested halfheartedly. “You know, like what they used to heal everyone who got petrified in second year – ”

“Don’t *encourage* him!” Hermione reproached, and Ron deflated slightly. “Harry, all year you’ve been *determined* to prove Malfoy is up to something, all without any proof! I don’t care how much of a prat he is, but in case you’ve forgotten, there are more *important* things for you to worry about!”

“Like what?” Harry snapped back, his temper rising.

“Like getting the real memory from Slughorn, for one!”

“Oh yeah!” Ron realized brightly, turning to Harry. “How’d it go with Ramsay?”

Harry’s anger ebbed away as he faced Ron.

“...Oh...pretty well, I guess.”

“How’d you get Ramsay to help you?” asked Ron.

Harry at once looked very guilty.

“...I told him that I wanted to ask Slughorn about my mum and dad, since he’d taught them at school...it was all I could think of!” he added defensively, upon seeing Hermione’s accusing expression. “I knew I couldn’t tell him about Dumbledore’s mission, or how the information would help the Order – Ramsay would *never* help Dumbledore, and besides, he doesn’t think *any* of us should be involved with the War, because we’re only ‘*children*,’” he spat the word with contempt. “...He wouldn’t have helped me if I’d told the truth.”

Hermione still looked uncomfortable, but seemed to acknowledge Harry was right. She nodded silently, encouraging him to go on.

“Anyway...I’d said I’d tried approaching Slughorn last week, and I ended up accidentally offending him somehow. Ramsay suggested I write to Slughorn, or that he could write a letter for me, but I told him I really wanted to have the conversation in person, one on one. Ramsay said that Slughorn really liked my mother at school, so it’d probably be easy to get him to talk about her. He said Slughorn’s proud, but he’s also a bit sentimental – like, he didn’t prop students up just to elevate himself, but also because he’s very fond of them and so sees their success as his greatest achievement.”

“So maybe you could use Slughorn’s fondness for your mother as a way to get him to open up to you?” Hermione said thoughtfully.

“Right.”

Ron smiled in satisfaction. “So it all worked out! Come on...let’s go grab some dinner! I’m starving.”

The feast was as delicious as ever. Ron was delighted by the number of people who’d stopped to congratulate him on his work in the last round and wish him luck for the next one – it felt like he would never be pale and freckly again, given how steadily the happy blush conquered his face and ears.

“Keep it up and you’ll be pinker than a Valentine’s Day card,” Harry said amusedly.

“Oh, piss off,” mumbled Ron through his big grin.

At one point Colin came up to meet them, his trademark camera hanging from his neck.

“Hi, Ron!” he greeted brightly.

“Hey, Colin,” said Ron.

Colin's grin, as always, was much too big for his face. "I got a copy of this printed for you – figured you'd want it, maybe to send to your folks – "

He held out an enchanted photograph – Ron took it from him to get a better look.

It was of himself, presenting his "pan" cake to the judges. His photographic self was smirking wryly and Ramsay (disguised as Dumbledore) was smiling in warm amusement – clearly this was the moment where Ron had teased him for his disguise.

"I took a few for the others too," Colin gabbed brightly. "Bridget loved hers – said she could see me making money with my pictures someday! I told her I wanted to work at the *Prophet*, and she thought that was cool...she's an awful nice sort, for a Slytherin..."

"Yeah, she is," Ron agreed absently, his eyes still watching the photo.

He had been so nervous at the time that picture was taken...but in that one moment Colin had captured on film, Ron had only been focusing on the humor of Ramsay impersonating Dumbledore, and not on the stakes.

Was that why he looked so confident – so much more confident than he'd ever thought he could be...?

Colin waited for Ron to say anything more; when he didn't, he pressed on.

"Well...good luck in the next round, Ron! Dennis and I'll be cheering you on!"

He turned away and headed back up toward the front of the table. Ron watched him go. Then, like a bolt of lightning, an impulse struck him so hard that he called after him.

"Hey! Colin!"

Colin halted, looking back at Ron.

“The MagicChef contestants are having a little cooking session down in the kitchens tonight,” Ron said awkwardly. “I know you’re not in the contest anymore, but...well, d’you want to come? Since you like cooking and all...”

Ron had been unsure about what he was suggesting and had felt even more so with every word that fell out of his mouth...but Colin reacted with nothing short of delight.

“...Yeah!” he said breathlessly, his eyes lighting up brighter than a car’s headlights. “That’d be awesome! Sure!”

Ron gave a faintly awkward smile. “Great! We’re meeting at 7, right after dinner.”

Colin beamed. “Awesome! S-see you then!”

With a new skip in his step, he scampered back toward the top of the table to sit with his brother Dennis.

“That was really nice of you, Ron,” said Hermione, her voice unusually soft.

Ron blushed darker still. “Don’t know why I did it, really...I mean, it’s not like he has to *practice* or anything...but I don’t know, I just...*felt* like it, you know?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah.”

Cho walked right past them at that moment to get to the Ravenclaw table. Harry and Cho deliberately avoided eye contact as she passed. Ron watched her sit down next to Marietta Edgecombe and, after contemplating the matter for a minute, got up and headed over to talk to her.

When Ron came back, Hermione was frowning slightly.

“Did you ask her to come too?” she asked. Her tone wasn’t reproachful, but it was a little less soft than it had been for Colin.

“Yeah,” said Ron defensively. “I mean...she *is* a good cook. And I feel sort of bad that she didn’t get what she wanted...”

Harry looked away, his face visibly uncomfortable. Ron had told him about what Cho had planned to do with the prize money, and Harry himself had acknowledged that it would’ve been a nice cause to work towards...but that didn’t make it any more comfortable for him. Even though he didn’t want anyone to ever *forget* Cedric, the idea of having to look at Cedric’s face every day, even if it was only made of marble, gave Harry no solace. All it would do would bring back memories of the *last* time Harry had seen that face, over and over again...telling Harry to bring his body back...

“Well, at least she won’t be dragging Marietta along this time, right?” Hermione asked coolly.

Ron frowned a bit reproachfully, but said nothing except “...No, she won’t.”

He glanced over at the Slytherin table, his blue eyes running along it until they found Daphne, sitting across from Pansy Parkinson but not engaging in conversation. Although her posture was proud and her dark hair was as beautifully pinned up as ever, her eyes looked a little red, as if she’d been crying. Ron’s mouth twisted into a frown as he returned to eating his steak and kidney pudding.

‘I can’t just walk over,’ he thought to himself dryly. ‘Imagine how badly Daphne would take it if I just bounded up to the Slytherin table and invited her with her whole house listening in...she’d properly murder me on the spot.’

He frowned around a mouthful of pudding. If only he’d thought up this idea earlier...then he might actually have had *time* to ask Daphne when no one else was around...

After dinner, he bid Harry and Hermione goodbye. Before doing so, he pulled Harry aside briefly.

“Hey, um...maybe lay off on the Malfoy stuff around Hermione?” he whispered to him. “I mean, I know you think he’s up to something, and I know there’s been a lot of dodgy stuff going on...but you know how she is. She believes in what she can see – nothing else.”

Harry frowned deeply. “But...if Malfoy *does* have some nasty plan in the works – ”

“Then I’m sure he’ll get caught in it,” Ron said soothingly. “Malfoy’s not *that* smart – remember, this was the idiot who once dressed up as a dementor to try to sabotage you during a Quidditch match.”

Despite his misgivings Harry couldn’t help but crack a small smile. Ron patted his shoulder.

“He’ll slip up, you wait and see. In the meantime...try to relax a little.”

Harry wasn’t entirely comforted, but he attempted his best smile. Ron smiled back much more assuredly, before turning and heading toward the kitchens. As Ron walked off, Colin Creevey dashed after him in an attempt to catch up.

“Hey, Ron! Wait for me!”

Ron slowed down just enough so that Colin would walk alongside him and the two walked down the stairs toward the kitchens and out of sight.

The two boys walked side by side, Colin chattering away the entire time. Ron tuned him out during much of their one-sided conversation, nodding politely and saying “Mm” and “Yeah” whenever Colin would stop to take a breath.

“ – And the way Arjuna chops things up with magic – *wow!* I could *never* be that fast, with just a knife! Dad showed me how to dice things – he used to cook a lot at his old job, back when he worked at Tom’s Diner – that was before he became a milkman, see – he likes being a milkman much better now, though, since now he’s off for most of the day, so he gets to see us more...back when we were little, he always got home super late, and we’d have to stay with babysitters – though one of them, Miss Julie, taught me how to bake pies, so that was cool! I heard Hannah’s good at making pies too – wonder if we’d be able to bake one together, if she wants to, I mean – ”

When Ron stopped in front of the portrait of the fruit bowl and Colin followed suit, they finally noticed the clip-clop of an extra pair of shoes just behind them. Ron looked up and smiled at the sight of Cho bounding up to them.

“Hey,” he greeted.

“Hi,” said Cho politely, before also nodding to Colin.

Colin showed none of Cho's restraint – he instead took a step forward and spoke very candidly.

"I'm awful sorry you got cut," he said at once. "I thought your mashed potato sundae looked delicious! And I *love* chocolate soufflés – my brother and I tried to make one once, and it ended up imploding in the oven – still tasted pretty good, though – "

"Thank you," Cho cut him off with a quiet laugh.

Ron took the opportunity to tickle the pear; the painted fruit giggled, and the painting swung open, allowing Ron to step inside. Standing around the kitchen once again were Bridget, Hannah, Rose, Kevin, and Astoria, and they all brightened up at the sight of him.

"Hey, Ron!" greeted Bridget.

She and Ron exchanged a high five that solidified into a sort of static, masculine handshake in mid-air. Ron then turned to Astoria, looking concerned.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "I heard about your argument with Ar – "

"Everything's okay," Astoria cut him off calmly. "Arjuna and I talked things over – it's all forgotten."

Ron frowned uncomfortably. "Well...that's good..."

Colin and Cho entered behind him at that moment, so Ron gave a half-hearted gesture toward them.

"Hope you don't mind, but I brought some friends," he said bashfully, as Colin waved cheerfully at everyone.

Bridget smirked. "Hope you don't mind, but I invited one too."

She nodded over her shoulder to the last person in the corner, who put down the pie she was making with Winky the house elf and glanced over her shoulder at the others.

“Millicent,” Ron greeted with a wry smile.

“Weasley,” Millicent responded, inclining her head in a short nod.

“I thought you always liked to do things your way.”

A ghostly smirk kissed the corners of Millicent’s lips.

“I do,” she answered evenly. “But I’m smart enough to know when things need to change.”

Ron grinned.

“I wanted to invite Daphne too,” he admitted to Bridget regretfully, “but I didn’t think of inviting anyone until dinnertime, and...well, I figured Daphne wouldn’t like me blaring out an invitation for everyone to hear.”

“She wouldn’t,” Astoria agreed coolly before Bridget could reply.

Bridget frowned, bringing a fist up to rest on her chin thoughtfully. “...Well...if we *are* inviting old friends to this little party...I suppose a late invitation’s better than nothing...”

She glanced at Millicent significantly. The heavyset Slytherin girl turned to Winky.

“Winky...could you please deliver a private message to Daphne Greengrass inviting her to cook down in the kitchens tonight?” she asked lowly.

“Of course, Miss Millicent!” Winky said brightly.

“Invite Owen Cauldwell too,” Kevin added firmly. “He’ll be in the third year Hufflepuff boy’s dorms.”

“Yes, sir!” squeaked Winky.

And with a *crack* she disappeared.

Round 3: Pre-Heat

That Tuesday morning Ron woke up in an amazingly good mood – it was dampened somewhat, however, when he found Harry already awake and, before Ron could tell him anything of what had happened the previous night, Harry had started into a long tirade.

“I realized something last night,” he explained. Ron noted the dark circles under his friend’s eyes. “Malfoy *never* talks anymore. Someone can ask him a direct question and he’ll either completely ignore them or just shake his head. Last night as Hermione and I were heading off to bed, we ran into Pansy and Malfoy having a row, and I swear, Malfoy refused to say *anything* to her, even when she was screaming and trying to provoke him. I mean – this is *Malfoy*. Normally he *never* shuts up, and yet he didn’t say *one word* to fight back. Weird, right?”

“Right,” Ron granted, though he was a bit putout that they were discussing this again.

“I couldn’t follow him because he disappeared into a crowd of first years,” Harry continued, “so I watched him on the Marauder’s Map last night, and he was sneaking around hours after curfew. He sneaked into the Astronomy Tower at one point and was up there for almost 30 whole minutes. But there’s something else – at one point he went down an abandoned hallway...and then suddenly *disappeared* from the Map all together.”

“Really?” said Ron, his eyebrows coming together in confusion.

“Yeah!” said Harry, infinitely more fascinated in the subject than Ron was and clearly not realizing it. “He was gone for almost twenty minutes before reappearing again in the same place.”

Ron frowned. “Maybe it’s a glitch in the Map?”

“The Marauder’s Map never lies,” Harry said insistently, his face deep in thought now. “The only question is...where is he disappearing to...?”

“Beats me,” Ron said dismissively, as he tried to steer the conversation back where he wanted. “Well, I had a busy night last night too – after I invited Cho and Colin to come down, Millicent sent Winky along with an invitation for Daphne and Owen too, so we all had a big cooking session in the kitchens together!”

“Oh,” said Harry. He looked startled by the sudden change of subject, as well as a bit dismayed that Ron had not been more interested in his theory about Malfoy. “Cool.”

“It was awesome!” Ron said eagerly. “Owen showed us this old journal that belonged to his dad – he was in the Muggle Navy, see – where he wrote down all these old recipes he’d collected from out of the country...we baked a loaf of fresh Hawaiian sweet bread, and bloody hell, Harry, it was *brilliant!* I asked Owen to let me copy the recipe so I could send it to Mum – I think it’ll be *perfect* with Christmas dinner next year...”

“Sounds fun,” Harry said halfheartedly.

Ron could sense Harry’s disinterest, and his smile faltered slightly. It seemed Harry wasn’t any more interested in hearing about his cooking session than Ron had been about Malfoy...

Rather than bring attention to this, though, Ron decided to simply drop the conversation.

“...I...guess we’d better get dressed.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, his tone similarly low and uncomfortable.

The two boys headed downstairs and headed down to breakfast, trying to put their uncomfortable morning behind them. When Hermione joined them, she plopped an old yearbook down in front of Harry at the Gryffindor table.

“There you go, Harry!” she said brightly.

Harry looked down at the book, perplexed. “...What’s this for?”

“This yearbook is from when Slughorn taught your parents!” Hermione explained, her face flushed with pride. “I found it in the library. I thought it’d be the perfect ammunition you need for your meeting with Slughorn – you know, use it as a guide post for your conversation, like, ‘*Professor, I found a picture in this old yearbook with you and my mum, with the subtitle of ‘Slug Club.’ What was that, exactly? Was it a Potions club, or a club for young academic achievers?*’”

“Oh,” said Harry. He sounded just as startled and putout as he had when Ron had changed the subject on him. “Okay.”

Noticing this, Ron shot Hermione a warning shake of the head over Harry’s shoulder; then he put a hand on Harry’s shoulder to make him look at him.

“Don’t worry, you still have two days until Slughorn’s supposed to arrive...you’ve got time.”

Hermione frowned. “Yes, but you should use that time to prepare! Dumbledore said it was *very* important that you get that memory – I don’t think you should focus on anything else until you get it – ”

“*Hermione*,” Ron cut her off, shooting her another admonishing look, “don’t stress him out. He knows it’s important...don’t you, Harry?”

“...Right,” Harry said lowly, though he couldn’t look either Ron or Hermione in the eye.

On Ron’s advice, Harry tried to speak to Slughorn a little more casually the next time they ran into each other that Thursday. Harry said Slughorn still seemed a little suspicious, but had relaxed enough to tell him about the Slug Club and some of its other members. Apparently Sirius’s brother Regulus had been in it too. Harry seemed rather disinterested as he recounted everything – Hermione took his disinterest to mean he was simply being impatient about how long he’d have to wait to get the information he needed, but Ron had a sneaking suspicion that Harry had had other things on his mind.

Friday morning before the next round, a lot of Gryffindors came up to Ron to wish him luck, including Lavender Brown.

“Good luck today, Ron!” she said breathlessly.

She swooped in to give him a quick peck to the cheek before running off to find Parvati at the far end of the table.

Ron was left staring after her, dumbfounded.

“What the bloody hell was *that* about?” he muttered.

“Search me,” said Harry.

He saw Hermione avert her eyes and immediately busy herself with the Yorkshire pudding in front of her so she wouldn’t have to answer.

Ron bid Harry and Hermione goodbye as usual, before heading off to meet up with the other student chefs down in the dungeons. Then that afternoon, as usual, the students gathered in the stadium ready to cheer on their competitors. Gryffindor’s stands were filled with the usual array of “Weasley is our King” and “Go Go Gryffindor” banners. Something that wasn’t usual, however, was that Harry had smuggled out the Marauder’s Map and hid it in his school bag this time. If Malfoy pulled *anything* during this round, Harry wanted to see him do it with his own eyes.

The judges came out one by one, leading their house’s student chefs onto the field as the crowd went wild.

“Ron looks excited,” Hermione murmured proudly.

“Mm,” said Harry, as he tried to angle his bag on the ground by his feet in just such a way that he could glance down and look at the Map without having to take it out.

“Welcome, one and all, to round three of MagicChef Junior!” Slughorn announced brightly. “In this round, our chefs will face a particularly difficult challenge in this opening pre-heat.”

Dumbledore’s light blue eyes swept over the competitors. “In this contest, some of you have settled comfortably into your own little niche...becoming – shall we say – a large fish in a small pond. Today, however...you will have to stretch yourselves, by preparing a *certain* fish for us.”

He wordlessly levitated a box-shaped object hidden underneath a purple velvet sheet into the air, hovering just over the judges’ heads. Raising his uninjured hand, Dumbledore then swept the sheet off, to reveal a large fish tank holding a bizarre-looking, ball-like fish with two feeble, spindly legs.

“The plimpy!” said Bagnold with a wide, charismatic smile. “A common water pest, which is best known for nibbling on the toes of unsuspecting swimmers – and also, to any good chef, a delicious meal, when cooked correctly.”

Ramsay summoned a long table over to him, which had a dead plimpy already set up on a cutting board; then, with a flick of his wrist, his silver-tipped wand transfigured itself into a chef's knife.

"Perfectly filleting a plimpy takes the best chefs a long time to master," he said, as he sharpened his blade by scraping it against another knife set up on the table. "Watch carefully...for I shall only demonstrate this once."

He set to work right away, lobbing off both of the plimpy's legs with his kitchen knife.

"First you chop off the legs – they're all sinew and cartilage anyhow, so there's no point in trying to cook them. Then you make an incision, right at the base of the head. The plimpy has a very thick hide, so you'll have to put in considerable strength when you make your incision, but *do not* cut its head off! You *must* stop when you reach the spine! The only problem is that the spine of a plimpy is made completely out of cartilage – no bones – so if you're not careful, you run the risk of cutting through the skeleton and completely severing the head. If you do that, getting the rest of the meat out will only be harder. Once you cut through the hide, though, you'll find very soft meat on the inside – cut along the plimpy's spine, swooping out the back – and put that meat aside. Then flip it on its other side, and do the same thing: cut through the hide, stop, cut along the spine, and *there!*"

Ramsay held the head of the plimpy perfectly connected to the flimsy spine up for everyone to see.

"There should be no yellow meat left on the spine – nothing but white fat."

Tossing the waste aside, Ramsay then started cutting up the plimpy meat into neat, even-sized slabs.

"When you're finished, you should have twelve perfectly portioned fillets in front of you – like so."

Ramsay withdrew his knife and pushed the cutting board forward so everyone could see. The onlookers burst into polite applause, and Ramsay smiled at all of them before, with a flick of his wrist, changing his knife back into his silver-tipped wand.

"There will be an addition to this challenge, however," he said, his blue eyes flickering over each of the chefs in turn as he spoke. "We are well aware that some of you – namely, those who grew up in magical households – may be more familiar with filleting plimpies than the others. To try to

balance out this discrepancy, we've decided that in this preheat round, you may only use your knives – *no magic*.”

The crowd started to chatter anxiously. Millicent, Astoria, and Hannah suddenly looked very nervous, but no one looked more horrified than Arjuna, whose expression resembled a deer in the headlights.

“You will have to make us twelve perfectly sized plimpy fillets as fast as you can,” said Dumbledore. “You will then be given two scores – one based on your speed and the other based on the quality of the fillets themselves. Your time starts...now.”

As the round started, the student chefs dashed to their stations, grabbing their knives and preparing the plimpies set up on their counters. Hermione watched through her Omnioculars, studying each of the competitors in turn.

“Rose is sort of sawing through the hide, since she's not that strong...ooh, Millicent Bulstrode chopped the head off – now she'll have to play catch-up...wow, Arjuna's barely gotten through the hide at all...”

Ginny looked up at Harry, ready to say something, but instead of looking down at the field, he seemed to be preoccupied with his bag.

“Harry,” Ginny said sternly.

Harry's head shot up abruptly. “What?”

Ginny crossed her arms, her brown eyes narrowing upon his bag suspiciously. “Got some really riveting *homework* you're dying to get to?”

“No,” Harry said quickly, as he shifted his bag around so she couldn't peek inside. “I just – think I forgot my Omnioculars...”

Ginny cocked an eyebrow at him. Luna, who was sitting on her other side, gave Harry a dreamily pleasant smile.

“Here you go, Harry,” she said, and she put her own pair in his hand. “You can use mine.”

Harry’s cheeks darkened in a blush.

“...Thanks,” he mumbled halfheartedly.

The Slytherin stands abruptly burst into applause – Bridget had just finished cutting up her fillets, and a smoky gold number “1” appeared over her head. A few minutes later, the Hufflepuff stands applauded Rose, and then the Gryffindor stands started roaring when Ron finished. Hannah, Astoria, Millicent, Kevin, and Arjuna followed.

In just under thirty minutes, all of the chefs had completed their preheat task. The judges then went around one by one, judging the fillets. Once they deliberated, they addressed both the crowd and the chefs.

“After much deliberation,” said Bagnold, “our ranking for fillet quality in this round goes thusly – at number 8...Millicent Bulstrode. Number 7...Kevin Whitby. Number 6...Rose Zeller. Number 5...Arjuna Belaji. Number 4...Ron Weasley. Number 3...Bridget Jaheem. Number 2...Astoria Greengrass. And finally...number 1, Hannah Abbott!

Hufflepuff’s stands burst into applause. Hannah hugged herself gleefully, as if she was trying desperately to hold in her excitement. Bridget and Ron exchanged grins. Arjuna, on the other hand, looked close to tears. These new numbers appeared in smoky silver next to the gold ones over each student chef.

“These two little numbers will make a big difference in the next round,” said Slughorn with a roguish wink. “So, student chefs, take a short break while your elves clean up your stations and prepare them for your elimination challenge! Which two chefs will end their journey with us tonight, I wonder...?”

Round 3: Elimination

“In this elimination challenge,” Ramsay announced, “you’ll be tackling a British chef’s worst nightmare...”

He levitated several pastries and enchanted them to dance over the chefs’ heads, wafting their savory smell into the air.

“...Hand-raised meat pies.”

“Meat pies, on their own, are nothing too difficult,” said Bagnold, “but *hand-raising* one – in other words, not using a cooking pan or tin when you put it in the oven– is singularly difficult. Your crust must be *incredibly* strong, as it will have no supports to keep it from falling apart or leaking while it’s baking. And of course it must still have the proper balance of flavor and texture ascribed to a typical meat pie.”

“We have randomly selected eight different types of meat for you, which are written on cards left at your stations,” said Slughorn. “You will then have to make us a hand-raised meat pie made with the ingredient on your card...once again, without the use of magic.”

This statement alone upset both the crowd and the student chefs, but Slughorn wasn’t finished.

“You will not, however...all start at the same time,” he said with a wry smile. “Remember those little numbers we gave you?”

He indicated the gold and silver smoke numbers still wafting over each station with his wand; in an instant the numbers melded together and, with a puff of smoke, transformed into new, white numbers above each station. Bridget’s “1” and “3” became “4”; Arjuna’s numbers became “13”; Rose’s became “8”; Hannah’s became “5”; Millicent’s and Kevin’s became “14”; and Ron and Astoria’s became “7.”

“Your total scores from the last round will determine the order in which each student will be allowed to start their pie,” Slughorn explained. “We’ll give additional preparation time to each student based on their totals – Bridget, having the lowest score, gets an additional 30 minutes; Hannah, being second, receives 25 minutes; Ron and Astoria 20, Rose 15; Arjuna 10; and Millicent and Kevin 5. Once all of our competitors have started, we shall then start the clock officially, and you will have two hours to finish your pies. Keep in mind, all of my non-chefs out there,” he added,

when the eight chefs looked around at each other in dismay, “that a good meat pie requires an hour and a half to two hours of baking in the oven.”

“That gives Kevin and Millicent almost no preparation time,” whispered Hermione.

“Arjuna, too,” said Ginny with a satisfied smirk. “Look how white she is – she knows she’s in trouble.”

The Ravenclaws holding an “*Arjuna and Astoria are our Aces*” banner on the other side of Luna shot death glares at Ginny.

“Bridget,” Dumbledore said airily, “your time starts...*now!*”

Bridget dashed over to her station, picking up the card on the counter and unfolding it. Once she’d read it, she turned to her house elf, Hardy, and while Hardy disappeared (presumably to grab her ingredients), Bridget took out a pan and put it down on the stove before fumbling around for a mixing bowl. Once Hardy came back with the right supplies, she immediately started mixing her dough together.

Five minutes later, Dumbledore called, “Hannah!” and Hannah darted over to her station. Once she’d read her card, she got to work immediately, with her house elf Pilo reappearing with ingredients little by little while Hannah worked on her pie’s filling.

Then five minutes after that, Dumbledore called, “Ron! Astoria!” and both chefs ran to their stations, likewise reading their cards and getting to work on their pies.

It was once Ron had started and looked comfortable in what he was doing that Harry allowed his mind to wander and his eyes to dart back to his schoolbag.

There was some movement with Malfoy’s dot on the Map. As Harry had suspected, he was far away from the stadium – he was skulking around outside...near the entrance to the Forbidden Forest...

Harry’s eyebrows furrowed. The last time Malfoy had been in the Forbidden Forest, he’d run away screaming from what Harry and he had not realized at the time was Professor Quirrel, temporarily possessed by Voldemort. Under any *normal* circumstances, Malfoy would’ve been much too

terrified to go anywhere near it...

There was a sudden small *boom* that made Harry abruptly look up. Down on the field, the oven at Arjuna's workstation had abruptly burst into white flames, covering half of the stations in unnatural purple smoke.

"Looks like her oven malfunctioned," Luna said with only mild interest.

"But she only just started!" said Hermione, her mouth twisting into a confused frown. "She couldn't have put anything in the oven yet..."

Ginny sneered. "Maybe the pressure is finally getting to old '*Acejuna*' and she accidentally set the oven off with a stray spell..."

"Maybe..." murmured Hermione, her eyes locked on Arjuna's workstation through her Omnioculars.

Once the judges had Banished the smoke and repaired Arjuna's oven, the round resumed as usual. Millicent and Kevin started, and five minutes later the official two hours kicked off; as the round got fully underway, Harry felt very comfortable once again letting his attention slide back down to the Map.

Malfoy was still milling around in the Forest, going deep enough that he was almost on the edge of the Map, and certainly far enough away that nobody would've been able to see him there.

'Hold on,' Harry realized, *'isn't that around the same area that Ron and I found Aragog?'*

For a split second he visualized Malfoy running into Aragog's den and felt a smirk glide over his face. Just as suddenly it disappeared when he noticed a familiar dot moving toward the same batch of trees Malfoy was hiding in.

Rubeus Hagrid...?

"Harry!"

Harry looked up, to see Hermione looking irritated.

“Harry, did you hear *anything* I just said?” she demanded.

“Uh...”

Harry was at a loss. Looking utterly frustrated, Hermione gave a great huff, got to her feet, and immediately shoved down the row and out of the stands.

Harry turned to Ginny and Luna, utterly perplexed.

“Don’t look at me, she was talking to *you*,” Ginny said coldly, her brown eyes shifting back to the competition and staying there.

The rest of the round went as expected, with the chefs working at a mile a minute to get their pies finished on time. When time was up, all the student chefs held their hands up away from their stations, breathing hard. Ron wiped his sopping forehead on his sleeve.

The judges’ table, however, was deserted. The student chefs and the crowd were left waiting for two minutes – three – four – as they looked around for some sign of Dumbledore, Ramsay, Bagnold, or Slughorn.

“What’s going on?” muttered Ginny, her eyebrows coming together suspiciously.

His attention solely on the competition for the first time, Harry raised Luna’s Omnioculars to his eyes, looking around for some sign of the judges. Finally he caught sight of them walking up the pitch – Ramsay was holding a pair of Omnioculars in his hand.

“They’re coming now,” said Harry. “Ramsay looks furious.”

A moment later, Hermione came back up through the stands to rejoin Harry, Ginny, and Luna.

“Where’ve you been?” Harry asked her. Hermione pointedly ignored him, keeping her narrowed eyes upon the judges down on the field as they faced the line of student chefs standing in front of their stations.

“We apologize for the delay,” said Ramsay.

He had his arms crossed behind his back. His voice was measured, but only so much as a crust hardening on top of boiling lava.

“While we were waiting to taste your meat pies,” he continued stridently, “we were made aware by a spectator watching the proceedings of some foul play going on at your stations.”

The crowd started to mumble amongst themselves. The student chefs all reacted with visible shock. Harry glanced at Hermione, startled, but she still refused to look at him.

“Didi,” said Ramsay, “will you come here, please?”

The brown-eyed house elf assigned to Arjuna gave a visible start. Then, with only a slight hesitation, she obediently disappeared from Arjuna’s station with a *crack* and reappeared in front of the judges.

“Didi,” Ramsay said sternly, “did you purposefully damage Arjuna’s oven?”

Didi quaked under Ramsay’s solemn gaze. She glanced back at Arjuna, who looked very dismayed, and then up at Ramsay.

“Didi did...not do nothing, sir,” the elf squeaked hesitantly.

Ramsay’s eyebrows furrowed in a way that made Didi quiver.

“Didi,” he said again, his voice harder still, “you may not know this about me...but there are few things in this world I can stand less than being lied to. I *order* you to tell me the truth – did you damage Arjuna’s oven?”

The elf crumpled up like she'd been hit in the stomach.

"D-Didi...didn't do *nothing*, sir!" she repeated, her brown eyes filling up with tears.

"We have evidence that says otherwise," said Ramsay, his voice rising as he held up the pair of Omnioculars. "Now I will ask this one last time calmly, and I want a yes or no answer – did you damage Arjuna's oven and make it spew smoke?"

"Didi did *not* – *do* – ***nothing***, sir!" Didi wailed as if in pain, tears streaming from her eyes.

Arjuna looked visibly upset by how the elf was writhing and contorting. Her black eyes darted up to the Ravenclaw stands, to the judges, and to Didi sobbing in a ball on the floor.

Ramsay opened his mouth as if prepared to angrily confront the elf, but, to everyone's surprise, Millicent stepped in.

"She can't give any other answer!" she said loudly, her brown eyes narrowed and her tone accusatory. "An elf *has* to follow a master or masters' direct orders – it's part of the magic inherent to their race – so she's using double negatives to fulfill your order the best she can without hurting anyone else in the process! Demanding a different answer from her only serves to put her through more pain!"

Everyone was left stunned. Millicent flushed, seeming both horrified and humiliated by her outburst, but retained the best posture she could. Ramsay, who was also taken aback, stared at Millicent for a moment, before looking down at the sobbing wreck of an elf plastered on the floor. Before he could say anything, though, he was interrupted again.

"Professor Ramsay, don't blame Didi."

Everyone turned to Arjuna. Her eyes had abruptly flooded with tears and her hands had flown to either side of her face as if she was trying desperately to keep her head from falling off.

"It was *my* fault," she admitted, choking as she tried desperately to restrain her tears. "I asked Didi to make that smokescreen. I...I read the note I had at my station...and it told me I had to use beef."

I can't cook with beef – cows are sacred in my family – we don't eat beef – ”

Ramsay's eyes widened just slightly.

“So...so I thought I'd switch my ingredient with Millicent's,” Arjuna admitted weakly. “Her station was next to mine – and she'd be starting after me, so it wouldn't be like I'd be hurting her chances...I knew *she* could cook beef...a-and it wouldn't give either of us a leg up, in the actual cooking...so...I thought there'd be no harm in it...”

She covered her face in her hands, distraught and ashamed. The people in the stands immediately started whispering conspiratorially – the Ravenclaw stands, however, were notably silent.

The judges exchanged looks. Then, after a moment, Bagnold stepped forward and brought a gentle arm around Arjuna in an attempt to comfort her.

“Arjuna...thank you for telling the truth,” she said gently. “That was very noble of you, under the circumstances.”

Sadly Arjuna didn't seem very comforted by this – even though she looked up at the judges, tears still kept streaming down her cheeks.

“We understand why you felt tempted to cheat,” Slughorn said sympathetically, even though his face was solemn. “But you know, there were other options – you could have come to us and asked for another ingredient, one that wouldn't oppose your beliefs...”

“Or,” said Ramsay, “you could have cooked something else and simply explained to us after the fact why you did not cook with your assigned ingredient. If your meat pie had been excellent even without the beef, it could have possibly saved you.”

Arjuna actually looked stunned – it seemed that she hadn't considered either of these choices at the time.

“Because you were truthful, I shall take no points from Ravenclaw house,” Dumbledore said gravely, “but I'm afraid, although your motivation was understandable...your transgression *cannot* be overlooked...and so we will have to eliminate you from the competition.”

Arjuna nodded feebly, her black eyes locked on the floor as even more tears streamed down her face.

“...Yes, sir,” she whispered in a tone that was the vocal equivalent of shattered glass.

Ramsay took a step forward to stand next to Bagnold in front of Arjuna.

“Even so,” he said, and his tone was significantly softer this time, “you are an *astonishingly* talented young chef, and we hope that you will improve your craft in the future.”

Covering her face in both hands, Arjuna fully broke down, her shoulders shaking with full-blown sobs.

“Come here,” murmured Ramsay, and he brought both of his arms around Arjuna and gave her a big bear hug. “There now – it’s okay...”

Once Arjuna had pulled herself together, she left the field, and, on Dumbledore’s direction, the remaining house elves brought the still crying Didi back to the kitchens to rest. Astoria watched Arjuna leave, her light blue eyes also filled with tears, but was forced to stay where she was while the judges went over the meat pies the other student chefs had made.

Rose had made a ham, eggs, and cheese meat pie cut in the shape of a heart. Unfortunately the pie ended up leaking a bit from the bottom and the eggs were slightly undercooked, but the judges applauded her creativity.

Hannah had made a classic steak and kidney pie. Her flavors were very good, but not only was the crust a bit too thin and so the filling leaked out of the corners, but Ramsay commented that Hannah could have taken more risks with her dish.

Astoria had made a venison pie with potatoes, cheese, carrots, celery and garlic. Astoria’s textures and flavors impressed the judges, but like Rose, her filling soaked through the bottom.

Kevin had made a sweet mince pie with mutton, cinnamon, and cloves. Although the flavors were delicious, the pie had imploded in the oven, making its filling spill out the sides, and so ended up

looking a bit misshapen.

Millicent, since Arjuna had swapped her original ingredient (chicken) with hers, had made a meat pie with ground beef, curry powder, and caramelized onions. Slughorn praised Millicent's taste for spices, though Ramsay pointed out that the filling was soaking through the corners and slowly peeling them apart.

Bridget had made a game pie with rabbit meat and celery and onion gravy. It was the only pie of the group that did not leak at all, and the judges praised Bridget's flavors, though Bagnold said that a little apple cider would've made it perfect.

Finally it was Ron's turn. When he greeted the judges, he held his head up high.

"Hello, Ron," greeted Bagnold.

"Hello, ma'am," he answered politely.

"And what have you made for us, young man?"

"I was assigned clams," said Ron, "so I've made for you a clam and lobster pie with a gravy made with leeks, onions, fennel, garlic, and cayenne pepper."

Dumbledore sampled the pie and then passed it along the table for the other judges to taste.

"Very interesting flavors," the Headmaster said with a small smile. "Was there a reason you picked these, in particular?"

Ron flushed. "Well, uh – I-I was thinking of bouillabaisse..."

"Ah yes, the French stew!" Bagnold said genially.

"Yeah!" said Ron, torn between nerves and zeal. "A...good friend of mine tried it while she was on vacation in France one year, and...well...I dunno, it just popped to mind..."

Harry did not miss Hermione looking down in a vain attempt to hide both her blush and the huge grin that had spread over her face behind her bushy hair.

“Very good, indeed!” said Slughorn brightly. “Though...I think I know what *Gordon’s* going to say...”

He eased open the pie with his knife and fork, revealing the filling slowly soaking out of the bottom. Ron winced visibly, but Ramsay merely smiled.

“Yes, that is a small flaw – but other than that, a very creative and perfectly delicious pie. Well done, Ron.”

Ron was so startled by Ramsay’s short, thoroughly positive answer that he struggled to recover himself.

“...Th-thank you.”

With that, he returned back to his station. The judges did not take long to deliberate before coming forward with their results.

“This round had complications we could not have foreseen,” said Ramsay solemnly, “but that does not change the sheer amount of pure talent that we have seen from all of you. The best meat pies today were made by...Ron – ”

Ron looked up at the Gryffindor stands, throwing both of his fists into the air triumphantly, as a chorus of “*Weasley is our King*” rippled through the crowd.

“ – Millicent – ”

Millicent nodded politely to the judges, even though she did not spare a smile.

“ – and Bridget.”

Unlike Millicent, Bridget did not hold back a huge white grin.

“Only *one* of you, however, baked their hand-pressed meat pie to perfection,” said Ramsay, “and that chef is...Bridget.”

The Slytherins in the stands started hooting and hollering. Bridget blew a kiss to them, beaming from ear to ear. Neither Millicent nor Ron begrudged Bridget for her victory, though – she had more than earned it.

“The other two chefs safe from elimination this week are...Rose – ”

Rose deflated like a balloon, bending over and hugging herself as she exhaled in relief.

“ – and Astoria.”

Astoria gave a small, halfhearted smile, her light blue eyes drawn away to the side of the field that Arjuna had left through ten minutes ago.

“That leaves Hannah and Kevin,” said Slughorn solemnly. “Please step forward.”

Both Hufflepuffs looked incredibly nervous as they stepped away from the other chefs. Kevin amazingly kept his composure, but Hannah had gone very pale.

“Hannah – your steak and kidney pie was classic, but almost conventional. Your crust was also too thin to contain your filling.

“Kevin – your mince pie with mutton had filling spilling out the top, which made it shapeless and messy.”

Hannah bit her lip anxiously. Kevin bowed his head, closing his eyes.

“The chef who will be leaving the competition today is...Kevin. Hufflepuff, please applaud your student chef.”

Kevin gave a small nod, as if he'd expected as much; he then, without skipping a beat, put on his best smile and waved up at the Hufflepuff stands as they applauded. He then turned to Hannah, shaking her hand and quietly whispering his congratulations. Hannah shook his hand, but then moved forward to give him a big hug. Encouraged by the gesture, Ron stepped forward to shake Kevin's hand too; then Bridget stepped up and did the same.

Kevin and Astoria locked eyes at one point – Kevin's smile flickered slightly when he noticed the upset look on her face.

"It's okay," he mouthed to her gently, his brown eyes gaining a sad glint despite the smile still attached to his lips.

It was at that moment that Astoria realized just how strong of a person Kevin was. Despite him being so disappointed, he could still keep his smile on, so as to help keep smiles on the faces of others.

Death's Head Shells

With the contest halfway through, the houses were rallying behind their respective competitors with more gusto. Many people considered Bridget the new favorite to win, though Hufflepuff still threw all of their support behind Rose and Hannah and of course Gryffindor frequently burst into choruses of “*Weasley is Our King*” with little prompting.

Arjuna had gone from Ravenclaw’s ace to Ravenclaw’s disgrace overnight. It was incredible to Harry how in just one day, she seemed to have lost every friend and admirer she’d ever had – all except for Astoria, who stubbornly stuck by her friend’s side and threatened to hex anyone who said a single sour word to her.

“I feel kind of bad for her,” Hermione admitted quietly Monday morning at breakfast. “Arjuna, I mean. I thought she was cheating to get ahead, because she didn’t think she could win...I didn’t know that she actually couldn’t cook what she was given...”

“She should’ve been upfront about it from the start,” said Ron with a frown. “I mean...those foods were assigned randomly, so if she knew she couldn’t cook beef, she should have said something before the contest even started.”

“Yes, but...imagine how hard that’d be, having to tell that to someone you really look up to,” said Hermione. “If I was in her place, I’d want to impress the judges – I think it’d be really hard for me to say I couldn’t do something, particularly if I was in a contest trying to *prove* I could do it...”

Harry put down the *Daily Prophet* he’d been reading for a moment to look at the others; Ron noticed his face was ashen and upset.

“Something wrong, Harry?”

Harry passed Ron the paper.

“Three more Death Eater attacks,” he said lowly. “One in London, one in Helmsdale, and one in Dufftown.”

“Dufftown?” repeated Hermione, alarmed. “That’s not far from here...”

“They’re moving closer to Hogwarts,” said Harry grimly.

Ron skimmed through the articles too, his blue eyes growing smaller with each line.

“In London, it looks like they can’t even properly identify the bodies...” he said slowly. “They used a Death’s Head Shell to set off a huge explosion, and the acid leftover ended up burning most of the bodies beyond recognition...”

He shoved the article away, unable to read anymore.

At that very moment, Hagrid left the staff table and walked down the aisle so he could leave the Hall. He looked even more miserable than Harry had been.

“Hullo, Harry,” he greeted. “Hullo, Ron...Hermione.”

Harry straightened up at once at the sight of him.

“Hagrid,” he whispered urgently, “were you in the Forbidden Forest last night?”

Hagrid looked startled. “...Yeah, I was. ‘S my job, ain’t it...being the Gamekeeper?” He gave an awkward chuckle, before adding as a gloomier undertone, “Besides...gotta check up on Aragog... bring him some food...help keep ‘im comfortable, ye know...”

He sniffled, wiping some tears from his eye with his sleeve.

“Did you see Malfoy in the Forest?” Harry asked sharply.

Hermione opened her mouth as if to snap at Harry, but Ron elbowed her in the ribs to quiet her. Hagrid frowned in confusion.

“*Malfoy*? No...can’t say I did.”

“There wasn’t anything weird in the Forest that night?” Harry pressed him. “Anything out of the ordinary?”

Hagrid frowned. “Well...now that ye mention it...there was a hive o’ Death’s Head Hawkmoths that had been moved from where it was las’. I’d hoped I could bring some of ‘em t’ Aragog on my way, since they’re right by ‘is den, an’ they’re a nice treat, fo’ spiders...but really, one o’ Aragog’s clan could’ve already gotten to ‘em, I s’pose,” he acknowledged with a shrug.

From the look on Harry’s face, he didn’t look so sure. Before he could say anything more, however, Hermione firmly stepped in to end the conversation.

“Thank you, Hagrid.”

Despite his lingering confusion about Harry’s interrogation, Hagrid nonetheless gave a casual shrug and a smile.

“...Y’re welcome. Well...better go start my rounds. Ye lot stay outta trouble now!”

Hagrid left. Hermione whirled on Harry.

“Harry, I *told* you to forget about – ”

“*Death’s Head Hawkmoths*,” Harry repeated, his green eyes very wide. “Whenever we use them in potions, they tend to blow things up – I bet that’s the *exact* stuff that’s in those Shells the Death Eaters used in London! And if *Malfoy* was there – ”

“Harry – ”

“ – and the Moths’ hive went missing around that time – ”

“*Harry* – ”

“ – then he must have smuggled them to the Death Eaters so they could use them in their attacks!”

“*ENOUGH!*” roared Hermione.

Everyone turned around to look at them. Ron quickly tried to tamper her down, bringing his hands down on her shoulders.

“Hermione, cool it,” he hissed, his eyes darting significantly around at the bystanders.

Still flushed with anger that she had no idea what to do with, Hermione forcibly quieted her voice but did not restrain her emotions.

“Those Shells were no doubt bought in Knockturn Alley, like all the *other* shady things in London,” she spat under her breath, “and even if they *weren’t*, it would’ve taken longer than *a few measly hours* to send those materials across the countryside and make anything destructive out of them – not to mention the fact that Hogwarts has the strongest magical shields in the *world* surrounding it, *made by Dumbledore himself!*”

She slammed her hands down on the table, facing Harry head on with her eyes blazing.

“If you want to focus on stopping the Death Eaters, then go work on what Dumbledore needs you to do – don’t play around like we’re first years trying to solve some silly mystery!”

Harry’s green eyes flashed. “‘*Trying to solve some silly mystery*’ resulted in us stopping Voldemort from getting the Philosopher’s Stone.”

“But you were wrong about who was responsible then just as much as you are wrong now!” snapped Hermione, ignoring Ron’s flinch at Voldemort’s name.

“*I was wrong?*” repeated Harry, his temper rising even though he struggled to keep his voice down. “You thought it just as much as I did! And Ron too! And that doesn’t change the fact that we were right about the most *important* part – namely, that Voldemort was trying to steal the Stone on the exact night Dumbledore was away, and that we were the only ones who could stop him! Maybe my details aren’t as clean as you’d like, but I’m *not* going to just sit back and watch people get hurt just because no one else sees the truth!”

“Guys, stop it!” Ron cut in, trying desperately to deescalate the fight. “Just...*stop*.”

Hermione looked at Ron, her eyes filling up with frustrated tears. Then, with a big, aggravated huff, she got up and stormed out of the Hall, tossing her bag over her shoulder as she went.

Harry and Hermione didn't talk for the remainder of the day. Ron stuck with Harry, but had promised to himself that he'd seek out Hermione later and try to talk her down, after he'd done the same with Harry.

“Harry,” Ron said seriously, after they left Transfiguration and headed back up toward the common room for a break, “I know you're worried about Malfoy and all, but...honestly, what could he really *do*, in all fairness?”

“Be the perfect eyes and ears inside Hogwarts for Voldemort, perhaps?” Harry asked dryly.

As usual, Ron flinched at the name. “You don't *know* that – Malfoy's done plenty of rotten stuff before, without You-Know-Who's approval. Just...put him out of your mind, for a little while – I told you, he'll slip up eventually...”

Harry looked very cross. “Ron, I *know* he's up to no good. This isn't just some stupid prank he's working on – if it was, he'd have roped in Crabbe and Goyle or something! He wouldn't be skulking around by himself like some stray cat – ”

“I know, it's dodgy,” Ron said earnestly. “But...well, you *can't* just worry 24 hours a day about it. There are other things going on – the upcoming Quidditch season – the MagicChef contest...”

“Ron, *the Death Eaters are closing in!*” Harry shot back, his tone wrinkled by frustration and desperation. “What will any of that stuff matter, if Malfoy's a Death Eater too and he's able to do something really awful right underneath everyone's nose?”

Ron's face went noticeably whiter, making his freckles stick out against his face.

“...*What will it matter?*” he repeated, his voice a shadow of its usual self, as though it came from a hundred miles away. “Is *that* what you think? That the contest *doesn't matter?*”

“That’s not what I meant,” Harry said at once.

“What *did* you mean, then?” Ron challenged him, looking mad for the first time.

“Just – well – there’s a *War* going on! All these people are dying and going missing – contests might be fun and all, but there are more important things than winning – ”

“Easy for *you* to say!” Ron shot back, his voice actually going a little higher in pitch as his face started to flush. “I’ve never won *anything* on my own! I’ve never once had *anything* that was mine – *solely mine*, in my whole life! Sure, I did better at Quidditch this year, but even then, I had to share the glory with you and the rest of the team!”

“Ron – ”

“And *you* – you got to win the Triwizard Tournament, all by yourself, with everything handed to you on a silver platter!”

“Oh *sure*!” Harry retorted, his tone cracking with upset and righteous anger. “*That’s* something to be jealous of – getting some *stupid* prize just because a Dark Wizard wanted to resurrect himself with my blood and I just *happened* to be the only person to make it back alive!”

By this point Ron’s face had turned a dark maroon.

“The point is, you’ve *always* had a chance to shine, and I’ve always stood behind you, cheering you on – and the *one* time I have the chance to really do well in something – to *really* prove myself, on my own – you can’t *bother* to do the same!”

“I *do* support you!” Harry said desperately.

“You sure don’t bloody well *act* like it!”

“Ron, you’ve *never* had to prove yourself – you’re my *best friend*! You started the D.A. with me –

you've saved Hermione's and my lives plenty of times – you're a perfectly brilliant Keeper, and everyone in Gryffindor knows it! I want you to do well, but if Hogwarts is in danger – ”

“I don't *care* what you think about me! Sorry, Harry, but I'm not doing this for you, or for Gryffindor, or for anyone else – I'm doing it for *me!*”

“A fancy contest title isn't going to protect you from Voldemort!” Harry shot back, his tone oddly tense despite the escalating anger in the conversation.

Despite the predictable flinch at the name, Ron stood tall, his blue eyes boring into Harry's green like acid.

“Maybe not – but I'm *not* going to shut out all the little joys of life just because everything in the world is going to pot...and if you think that's stupid of me, then go the hell ahead!”

Harry, still looking upset, opened his mouth as if to answer, but Ron shoved past him, knocking his shoulder roughly against his as he went.

Ron left down the opposite staircase, not really sure where he was going. Maybe the grounds by the Lake, to clear his head...or maybe to go find Hermione – maybe she was at the Library...

It was as he headed downstairs toward the front double doors, however, that he was stopped by the sound of a terrible wail.

Ron turned. At the base of another staircase, not far from the Great Hall, were Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott. Susan was on the floor with both of her arms around Hannah, who was curled up in a ball and hiding her face in both hands as she sobbed uncontrollably. A letter lay abandoned on the ground a short ways away.

“Hannah!”

Ron dashed over, his face full of concern.

“Hannah, what...what happened?”

Hannah was so lost in her tears that she was unable to answer. Susan looked up at Ron sadly, shaking her head slowly.

“It’s her mum,” she said quietly. “She’d been shopping in London yesterday, near where the Flare went off. Her dad went to the Ministry, and...he picked out her body, in a line-up. ...He recognized her by her brooch,” she added in a murmur so soft it was barely audible.

Hannah gave a terrible, grief-filled scream that sounded like it was being ripped out of her, before crumpling in on herself, clutching her own forearms desperately as she sobbed harder.

Ron was left speechless, not sure what in the world he could say. To lose your mother, and then to find out by post – with your father only being able to recognize her based on what she was wearing, rather than her face –

All he could think of to do was bend down next to Hannah and hold her hand. He wanted to say something too...but “*I’m sorry*” just felt like such an insignificant, stupid, meaningless phrase.

Self-Destructive Tendencies

Hannah left Hogwarts that same day, with plans not to return until the following week. News of what had happened to her mother swept through the school quickly, leaving most of the students wondering if she'd have to forfeit her place in the contest too.

Tuesday night Ron went down to the kitchens to meet up with Bridget and the others. He was the last to arrive, and he was startled when he found Arjuna and Astoria already standing in the middle of the group, talking to everyone. They both stopped at once, though, when he entered.

"Hey, Ron," said Bridget. Her dark face was notably solemn, without a single touch of a smile.

She walked over to him and they clapped their hands together in their usual static, masculine handshake. Ron then glanced at Arjuna with some suspicion.

"Arjuna had an idea of something we can do for Hannah," Kevin explained, noticing the tension between the two at once and gently trying to pacify it.

Ron raised an eyebrow. "For Hannah?"

Arjuna gave a weak nod.

"Look," she started slowly, trying to project confidence even though her tone sounded choked in the back of her throat, "I know I did wrong in the contest...but whatever you think of me, I never thought ill of any of you. And more importantly...what Hannah's going through...that's my worst nightmare. My mum – she's really good with Charms, but...nothing else. She only received the one NEWT, when she was at school. She can cook like nobody's business, and her Charms are amazing, but...she's no Auror. If she were there...where Hannah's mum had been..." She swallowed. "...I know she would've been no match for the Death Eaters..."

Despite himself Ron felt his distrust ebb away.

Astoria wrapped her arm around Arjuna supportively. This encouraged Arjuna to continue a little more assuredly.

“So I hoped you’d...help me make a few care packages, for her and her father,” she said. “I brought some enchanted food containers,” she indicated a small pile of bright blue dishes and Tupperware on the counter, “that we can pack all the food in, to keep it hot and fresh...I thought it might make them feel better, to receive some nice, hot food made just for them.”

The others looked at Ron. Ron didn’t have to consider the idea long before his mouth spread into a very small smile and he nodded.

“...Sure.”

Over the next two hours, the student chefs pitched in, cooking and baking delicious dishes to send to the Abbott house. Colin and Kevin worked together on a chocolate soufflé. Astoria made a spinach and cheese breakfast quiche. Daphne baked Sally Lunn bread, and Owen mixed together a cinnamon vanilla butter to go with it. Rose made an apple pound cake with a caramel glaze. Millicent made a Pesto Lasagna with creamy bechamel sauce. Cho made a carrot cake decorated with white frosting and little yellow icing hearts. Bridget cooked up a big bowl of Potato Soup with Bacon and Asparagus. Arjuna baked a delicious Indian bread she called Aloo Paratha, while also enclosing two little covered cups of fresh chutney that Owen had made for it. Ron made a new variation of his chocolate cream pie with curry powder, this time taking the time to taste the batter beforehand to make sure the spice was not overpowering.

Once they’d sealed all of the food in their containers, Astoria decided that they should send little notes for Hannah on each of the dishes. Most of the group was able to scribble something down quickly, but Ron was at a loss. He bit his lip as he stared down at the blank piece of parchment.

“What is it?” Daphne asked him, as she secured her note to her bread tin.

Ron shook his head. “...I don’t know what to say. I mean – what *can* I say? She lost her *mum*. I’ve never lost a family member that close before...”

“I have.”

Everyone looked up at Owen. The third year was leaning up against the edge of the kitchen counter with his arms crossed, his casually slouching posture making him look much smaller than he actually was.

“I lost my dad when I was seven,” he said quietly. His voice was amazingly level, given the subject

matter. “He’d gotten this disease called Lupus – it attacks the immune system and makes you sick all the time. He was a Muggle, so he stayed at a hospital about an hour from our house. Mum and I had gone to visit him just the day before – he’d said he felt great and was excited to get back home and build that treehouse he’d promised me. Then late that night, Mum was called to the hospital and she left me sleeping at home with Grandma Trudy. When Mum came back the next morning... she told me he was gone. From what Mum told me later, he’d had a heart attack that night and the doctors were struggling to restart his heart and keep him alive...but when they did, all they saved was his body – he’d already lost all brain function when he’d had the heart attack.”

The other chefs all looked horrified. Owen lifted himself fully to his feet, straightening up as he stared Ron down.

“Would you like to know what *I* would’ve wanted to hear...if someone had written me a letter after it happened?”

Ron was so stunned that all he could do was give a shaky nod.

“Don’t say you’re sorry,” said Owen. “Don’t give your condolences. I heard those words over and over, and after a while, they lose all meaning. Even though you know that the person means well and you appreciate the effort, it doesn’t really comfort you at all. It doesn’t matter if *they* feel sad about what happened – what matters is knowing they’ll be there to listen...not that they’ll spout the words that we’re all trained to say.”

Everyone was left speechless, except for Cho, who gave a small nod.

“Sometimes you need to follow that person’s lead...when they lose someone,” she said softly. “When Cedric died...all I ever heard was people telling me they were sorry...but they couldn’t give me what I needed, which was...well, to know why it had happened. No one could tell me why...except for Harry...”

The end of her sentence trailed off into nothing. Kevin glanced from Cho to Owen, before he walked over to the counter and picked up another sheet of parchment and a quill and handed them to Owen.

“...Owen...why don’t you write a letter, from all of us?” he said gently.

The others nodded in agreement. Owen looked at the parchment and then up at Kevin; then he took

them both and wrote out a quick note.

Dear Hannah,

This is the first of several packages we'll be sending your way. We missed having you down in the kitchens, so we cooked with you and your father in mind. The containers are enchanted to keep the food warm, so hopefully they'll help fight the chill in the air.

Take your time and please take care of yourself. We're all here for you.

He then signed his name at the bottom. Arjuna added her name, then Kevin, then Daphne, then Bridget, then Rose and Colin, then Astoria, Millicent, and Ron.

As Ron read over the letter, a thought flickered to his mind.

"I think..." he said, his eyes drifting to Bridget, Rose, Millicent, and Astoria, "...I think we should tell Ramsay that we want to put the contest on hold, until Hannah gets back."

Astoria smiled. "I think that's a great idea."

Rose and Millicent nodded too.

"Go ahead and add it to the letter," said Bridget with a small smile.

So Ron took the quill and added his own postscript.

P.S. We'll convince Ramsay to hold off on the next round until you come back. Can't wait to see you in the kitchen again!

The next morning Ron left the dorm early that morning to send off his chocolate cream pie with one of the Hogwarts owls (Pig was too small to lift it). Then, avoiding Harry when he tried to flag him down at the Gryffindor table, Ron grabbed a piece of toast and stuck it in his mouth before

heading down to the dungeons.

He met the four other remaining contestants – Bridget, Astoria, Rose, and Millicent – just outside Ramsay’s office. Bridget rapped on the door before opening it.

“Professor Ramsay?”

Ramsay, who’d been sitting at his desk grading papers, raised his head as they entered the room.

“Hello, Bridget,” he greeted. His voice was noticeably grim. “Hello, Astoria – Rose – Millicent – Ron.”

“Professor,” Ron stated firmly, “we’ve talked it over, and...we don’t want Hannah to have to quit the contest.”

Both of Ramsay’s eyebrows rose.

“Hannah’s one of the best of us, easily!” said Rose earnestly. “She just lost her mum – I know she’d hate not being able to finish the contest too!”

“If she’s up to it when she gets back, then she should still be allowed to compete,” Astoria agreed firmly. “We’ll wait.”

Bridget and Millicent both nodded. Ramsay looked around at all of them, still visibly surprised – then his mouth spread into a proud smile.

“...I was hoping to send a letter to Hannah about her place in the contest today,” he admitted. “Fortunately you came to see me before that letter was sent...so now I can add that we’ll all be happy to wait until she returns to school.”

Ron grinned broadly at Bridget.

“Thanks, Professor,” he said.

Ramsay nodded. “Now you all should get to class – use this time off to catch up on your studying, even if you still don’t have to do the homework.”

The five students left the room, breaking apart and heading off in different directions. Bridget stuck with Ron as the two strolled out toward the Lake.

“When I heard about the attack in London, I was worried,” said Bridget. “Mum’s restaurant wasn’t far from where the attack happened...fortunately I got a letter from her the same day telling me she was all right...”

“That’s good,” Ron mumbled.

Bridget sat down under the tree, Ron following her lead. Bridget lay down in the grass with her arms behind her head.

“Do you reckon Hannah will like everything?” she asked.

“Sure,” Ron said, startled. “I mean, it all smelled amazing.”

Bridget gave a weak smile.

“I had no idea what to make. Mum’s Potato Soup always does really well in the winter, but...what do you make for someone when they’re grieving? I’ve lost plenty of friends before, sure, but that’s not really the same thing, is it?”

Ron looked at her in concern. “Lost plenty of friends?”

Bridget shrugged. “Not to death or anything – just...lost ‘em. Sometimes it was their fault...but most of the time it was mine.”

Ron’s expression seemed to demand explanation, so Bridget went on.

“I have something of a self-destructive tendency, when it comes to friends. I remember Georgette – she’s one of our prefects, in Slytherin house – saying it’s a problem a lot of us Snakes have...like, we get overprotective of our friends to the extent that we’re baring our fangs at any perceived threat that comes their way...or worse, going out of our way to make ourselves look good to them, no matter what...”

Bridget’s eyes drifted up toward the clouds absently.

“...One time, back in ballet class, I made friends with this girl named Lila, right? She was beautiful – she had long, brown hair and big green eyes. I think she would’ve been in Gryffindor for sure, if she’d gone to Hogwarts. But...well, I knew what she thought about people who were different or weird, so...I played myself up, trying to blend in and seem normal. I’d chat with her about boys...pretend that I had crushes on random boy bands...all because it made me happy, being around her, and I was desperate to make sure she liked me too. But then one day I looked in the mirror...and I was disgusted by what I saw. I was fake and phony – and it was all because I was trying to impress Lila. And whenever I had tried to be honest...well, she didn’t want to hear it. So one day...I just stopped talking to her...even when she tried to meet up, I would brush her off, not knowing how to be honest about how I felt...until finally, she blew up at me, calling me a traitor and a loser and saying we were through. And that was that.”

It looked like thoughts were swirling in Bridget’s eyes.

“I still miss Lila sometimes,” she admitted quietly. “She was great at making people laugh, when the situation called for it.”

“It wasn’t good for you, though, clearly,” said Ron, frowning deeply.

“Oh, sure,” Bridget granted, “I know the situation wasn’t healthy...but it still hurt just as much to break it off as it did to stay there.”

“Because you cared about her,” surmised Ron.

“Mm.”

Ron shrugged. “Well, she clearly wasn’t a true friend, if she couldn’t accept you as you were.”

Bridget smirked. “Hn – well, *you’ve* certainly never had that problem, I’d wager. You, Potter, and Granger are inseparable, aren’t you?”

Ron looked away uncomfortably. Bridget turned over so that she was on her stomach, propping her chin up on her hands.

“...Not so much?” she asked, her face scrunched up in concern.

Ron sighed. “It’s complicated...”

He tried to explain what was going on between him and Harry without going into too much detail about Dumbledore’s mission. Bridget listened patiently, nodding every-so-often as she took it all in. When Ron was done, she raised her eyebrows dully.

“Sounds like Potter’s got a bit of Slytherin in him.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ron.

“Self-destructive tendencies,” Bridget said simply. “You said he’s worried about Draco Malfoy being a Death Eater – sure, that’s stupid, but if Draco *was* a Death Eater, that would threaten Hogwarts and everyone in it, wouldn’t it?”

“I suppose,” granted Ron.

“And everyone at the *Daily Prophet* has been crowing about how Potter’s some ‘*Chosen One*’ destined to defeat You-Know-Who and all that, yeah?”

“Yeah...but all of that’s sort of rubbish,” Ron said quickly, knowing full well that Harry didn’t want everyone to know about the prophecy, “You-Know-Who’s just put a big target on Harry’s back, that’s all...”

“Exactly,” said Bridget. “And if *he* has a target on his back, then what about the people he cares about?”

She casually tossed her braids over her shoulder. “From where I stand, it sounds like Potter’s gotten a bit paranoid – and who can blame him, really? He’s not being selfish – he’s just caring too much in the wrong ways. You shouldn’t *forgive* him for that, mind you – he needs to figure out his mistakes on his own first – but at least it might make it easier for you to forgive him, once he’s screwed his head on straight.”

Ron leaned back against the tree trunk, gazing up at the sky too.

“I guess so...”

“Ron!”

Bridget and Ron both looked up at the same time, to see Hermione running up to them.

“*There* you are!” said Hermione. “I was looking – ”

She then caught sight of Bridget, who she hadn’t noticed before. She abruptly fell silent.

“...Oh. I’m sorry, I...didn’t mean to interrupt...”

“You didn’t,” Ron said quickly, getting to his feet. “We were just talking.”

Hermione’s eyes floated from Ron to Bridget, a weird glint flickering through them.

“...Well, you missed Transfiguration,” she said stiffly. “I know you don’t have to do the homework, but I didn’t think you would just *skip* it...”

“Oh! No, I just lost track of time,” Ron said sheepishly. He turned to Bridget. “See you later, then?”

“Bye,” Bridget said coolly.

Hermione turned on her heel and started back up toward the castle. Ron dashed a bit to catch up with her.

“You could’ve told me where you were *going* this morning,” Hermione said accusingly. “Unless you thought just because I was mad with Harry meant that I wasn’t talking to you either...”

“No, I...hadn’t thought that,” Ron said awkwardly. “We just planned to meet with Ramsay first thing, to talk to him about Hannah – ”

“You and Bridget?” Hermione asked with a raised eyebrow.

Ron frowned. “And Astoria, Millicent, and Rose, yeah.”

Hermione didn’t reply, keeping her focus solely ahead as her grip tightened around the books under her arms.

“What’s with you?” asked Ron, feeling defensive for a reason he couldn’t quite put into words.

“Nothing,” sniffed Hermione.

“Come on,” snapped Ron. “You’re acting bonkers.”

Hermione stopped walking and whirled on him. “*Am* I? Well, maybe that’s because you just skipped class to play hooky with Bridget!”

“I wasn’t *playing hooky*! We were just talking about stuff and I lost track of time!”

“And what was so *engaging*, exactly?”

“I was telling her about Harry, if you must know.”

“Something you couldn’t have talked about with *me*?”

“You weren’t there!”

“I’ve *always* been there!” Hermione shot back, her voice cracking. “*Always*! You and Harry were my first friends, *ever*, and you – you just don’t *understand* that, do you?”

She turned away and dashed away up the hall, leaving Ron feeling perfectly lost.

Making Up

After getting into two big arguments with his two best friends in one day, Harry was left alone and full of self-loathing. His concern about Malfoy, however justified he felt in it, had driven away the two people he had always thought he could rely on...and having neither Ron nor Hermione to sit next to in lessons was difficult. He'd taken to sitting with Neville, who showed him a little sympathy.

"You're right in a way, Harry," Neville had said bracingly that Thursday. "I mean, yeah, in a big sense, no one's really going to think about who won or lost a contest when You-Know-Who comes knocking on your door...but still, you were being sort of a jerk about it."

"Tell me something I don't know," Harry muttered gloomily.

Neville frowned. "Okay, then – how about this: if you want to fix things, maybe you should try to show Ron and Hermione that your priorities have changed? It's like Gran says – actions speak louder than words..."

Harry considered this advice over the rest of the day. Several times he saw Ron in the hallway and tried to reach out to him, but it seemed that whenever he tried, Ron was occupied elsewhere. Harry didn't even see Ron in the dorms at night or in the morning before class, since he was out until very late and then up very early – Harry suspected that Ron had been spending all of his time in the kitchens. Was it to practice for the contest, or was it just to avoid him? Harry wasn't sure...but it seemed that Ron wasn't speaking to Hermione either, so maybe Ron wasn't just avoiding Harry...

Regardless, Harry came to the conclusion that he couldn't just wallow around in self-pity desperately trying to get Ron's attention. If Hermione didn't want to talk to him and Ron wasn't going to slow down enough to let him apologize properly, well, then he'd just have to do something about it.

That Sunday Harry saw Slughorn going down to the dungeons to visit Ramsay in his office, and he made up his mind. If Slughorn was still visiting Hogwarts even though the contest round had been put off, then it was the chance he needed to get that memory. All he needed was a little luck, he realized...and he knew *exactly* where he could get some.

Just after 1 AM on Monday morning, Hermione had fallen asleep in one of the cozy chairs in front

of the Gryffindor fireplace. She'd taken to hiding out in the library a lot that last week – it was something she'd used to do in first year, back when she didn't have anybody to talk to. In the library you were generally not supposed to talk, after all, so the silence wasn't nearly so lonely...

She awoke out of a deep sleep to someone grabbing her shoulder and shaking it.

"Hermione – *Hermione!*"

Her eyes blinked open sleepily, to see Harry smiling broadly at her.

"Hermione, I *did* it!" he whispered gleefully. "I got the memory for Dumbledore!"

Hermione gave a start. "*What?*"

"I thought about what you said, and...you were right," he said. "I wasn't putting the attention on what Dumbledore needed me to do that I should've...and I saw Slughorn going down to meet Ramsay, so I thought it'd be the perfect time to talk to him. I knew I'd need some luck to make sure I could catch him while he was alone, so I used some of the Felix Felicis Ramsay gave me – "

He took out the tiny bottle from his robes – it was now half-empty.

" – And Felix told me to go see Hagrid, right? On the way over, I found Slughorn at the greenhouses..."

Harry went into the whole story as Hermione listened. He told her about how Slughorn and he had found Hagrid sobbing over a dead Aragog at the edge of the Forest and had helped him bury the large spider; about how Slughorn and Hagrid got drunk back at Hagrid's cabin and Harry was able to coax the intoxicated Slughorn to give him the real memory; and finally what the memory was and what it meant.

"So these things – Horcruxes," Hermione said slowly, "hold pieces of your soul?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Voldemort wanted to make seven of them, but he lost his chance in making the seventh when he failed to kill me. Dumbledore says they'll try to possess people and can

sometimes even carry some of the owner's personality too – ”

“*Tom Riddle's diary!*” Hermione realized.

“Exactly! I destroyed one of them by accident by stabbing the diary with the basilisk fang, and Dumbledore's already destroyed another, which was Slytherin's ring...so all that's left to do is find the other four! Slytherin's locket – Helga Hufflepuff's cup – Nagini – and something of Gryffindor or Ravenclaw's...”

Hermione's entire face had lit up. “Oh, Harry, this is *fantastic!* Now that you and Dumbledore know about Voldemort's Horcruxes, we know what we have to do to stop him once and for all! Now we have a plan!”

She took Harry's hand and squeezed it.

“I'm so proud of you,” she said. “I knew you could manage it.”

“I'm sorry I was being such a prat,” Harry muttered.

Hermione gave a small smile. “And I'm sorry I yelled.”

She got to her feet, yawning as she closed her copy of *Standard Book of Spells, Grade 6*, which had flopped over onto the floor when she had dozed off.

“Well, I'm going to tuck in...see you in the morning.”

“Night.”

When Harry went up to the Gryffindor boys' dorms, he found that Ron had still not arrived yet. Harry tried to stay up for him, but ended up dozing off around 2 AM.

When he woke up Harry caught sight of Ron, already fully dressed, darting out of the dorm. Harry stumbled out of bed, still in his uniform from the day before, and tried to chase after him.

“Ron!”

But Ron didn't answer – he hadn't heard him. Or chose *not* to hear him...

Begrudgingly Harry got dressed and headed down to breakfast. He met Hermione on the way down, but once again, Ron was nowhere to be found.

“I think he's spending most of his time down in the kitchens with Bridget,” Hermione muttered bitterly. “Dobby's been Apparating him into the dorm, so he won't get in trouble for being out of bed after hours.”

Harry frowned. “Well...I guess even if the contest round is put off, he should put in the practice...”

Hermione gave a disapproving sniff. Harry glanced at her out the corner of his eye – she looked rather despondent. She kept skewering her Shepherd's Pie with her fork.

“...Come to think of it, why are you two fighting?” Harry asked, his frown deepening.

“Who says we're fighting?” grumbled Hermione.

Harry shot Hermione a dry look. “I might wear glasses, Hermione, but I'm not blind.”

Hermione's head fell slightly. She pushed her Shepherd's Pie away, as if she suddenly felt too sick to eat it.

“...Harry...has Ron ever talked to you about Bridget?”

Harry blinked. “No...I mean, nothing that he didn't also tell you...”

Hermione bit her lip.

“Parvati was passing rumors around that maybe they were...seeing each other,” she mumbled.

Harry gave an incredulous laugh. “*What?*”

Hermione flushed. “Well, he’s always really friendly around her – smiling at her during the contest, shaking hands, whispering – her, too – ”

“Hermione, being friendly doesn’t mean you like a girl,” Harry said incredulously. “It’s that kind of thinking that got Rita Skeeter thinking I was dating *you*, remember?”

This seemed to make Hermione feel a little better. She attempted a weak smile.

“So...you don’t think there’s something between them?”

“I don’t think Ron would keep it from us if there was,” Harry said nonchalantly.

The smile slid off Hermione’s face as she returned her gaze to her abandoned pie.

“...I don’t know if that’s true.”

Harry quirked an eyebrow at her.

“Well, I mean – ” Hermione stammered, her voice getting a little higher, “ – people don’t always say how they feel – sometimes...sometimes they just can’t admit it – you know what that’s like...”

A familiar mane of long red hair flickered through Harry’s mind. His eyes fell down to his plate.

“...Yeah...I do.”

Hermione looked up at him, her brown eyes very watery.

“I’ve *wanted* to be honest,” she admitted. “I think Ron has too. But I just...I don’t want to *ruin* anything – and I know he probably feels the same way...”

She sighed quietly, resting her head in her hands.

“...I guess I’d always thought...that it wouldn’t be easy for him to move on...that maybe we’d have to talk it over, at some point. But...well, Ron’s getting all this attention now, thanks to him being a big Quidditch star and in the running to win Ramsay’s contest...you have no idea what it’s like, having to listen to Lavender gush about how much she’d like to *bake cookies with him* –”

Harry made a face.

“It’s not that I don’t want Ron to be happy,” Hermione said insistently. “I’d always sort of assumed that...we’d agree that we wouldn’t want to endanger our friendship, in the end...but...it still doesn’t feel any better when Ron’s seeing other girls...I know it’s stupid of me, and selfish, but...”

“But you feel like you’re stuck,” finished Harry.

“Mm-hm.”

Harry noticed Ginny leaving the Great Hall. Dean was following behind her, as if trying to make her slow down and talk to him, but Ginny looked like she was having none of it. He watched them go before moving forward and leaning his shoulder against Hermione’s. Hermione rested her head on his shoulder as she forced back her tears. They sat together at the table for a minute, before Hermione forcefully brushed her hair out of her eyes.

“Come on,” she said thickly. “We’ve got Charms.”

As the day went on, Harry and Hermione caught almost no glimpse of Ron. It was like he’d put on Harry’s Invisibility Cloak and disappeared – he wasn’t even in any of their classes that day. Harry couldn’t help but feel a little irritated at Ron for avoiding them, particularly whenever he caught

sight of Hermione's downcast face, but then he'd remember how badly they'd ended their last conversation and felt rather humbled again.

Still, by the end of the day, it bothered Harry enough that when he and Hermione sat down for dinner, he abruptly put down his knife and fork and got to his feet before taking a bite.

"Come on," he told Hermione, before immediately striding out of the hall.

Hermione looked bewildered as she rushed to follow him. "What – where are we going?"

"To the kitchens," said Harry. "If Ron's going to spend all his time there, well, then we'll just have to go find him."

"But –" stammered Hermione, "what if he doesn't want to see us? What if –"

"Sorry, he's had more than enough time without us," Harry answered, a slight edge to his voice. "I'm certainly not going to toss out our friendship just because of some stupid fight."

It didn't take them long to get downstairs. Harry reached out and tickled the pear, making it guffaw with laughter before the oil painting swung open to reveal the kitchens.

All of Ron's fellow chefs – Astoria, Arjuna, Cho, Owen, Kevin, Rose, Millicent, Bridget, Daphne, and Colin – were inside, working at different countertops, and they all looked up when Harry and Hermione entered, visibly surprised. Millicent and Daphne suddenly gained very stony expressions, while Colin waved jovially to them.

"Hi, Harry! Hi, Hermione!"

"Hi, Colin," said Harry uncomfortably. "Is Ron here?"

"Not yet," said Cho quietly. She pointedly avoided eye contact with either Harry or Hermione. "I think he's sending one last owl to Hannah, letting her know we're sending another round of packages tonight."

“Packages?” recurred Hermione.

“Care packages,” explained Kevin. “We sent her and her father several dishes last week and we thought we’d send another round of them tonight, instead of just practicing like we usually do...”

“Besides,” said Bridget, “we couldn’t just let Ron do all the work.”

Harry blinked. “Ron?”

Bridget crossed her arms. “Owen figured that Hannah and her father probably haven’t been able to think about cooking any meals, while dealing with the funeral arrangements...so we’ve been down in the kitchens, making and sending them meals. We were *supposed* to just take turns around classes, but...well, Ron just didn’t seem to ever want to go, so he stayed here for most of it.”

Hermione and Harry both glanced at each other, their faces both rippling with guilt. Bridget picked up on their reactions at once and her black eyes narrowed critically at them.

“What do you want with Ron?”

Hermione looked affronted by the question.

“I’ll have you know we’re his *friends*,” she shot back sharply.

“Sure haven’t acted like it, from what I’ve gathered,” Bridget answered coolly.

Hermione looked like she wanted to smack her; fortunately Astoria interceded, stepping between the two of them and bringing both her hands up to stop them from moving at all.

“Bridget, quit it,” Astoria murmured reproachfully. “Whatever difficulty Ron’s having with his friends is none of our business.”

“I’m *making* it my business,” challenged Bridget, her eyes flashing at Hermione almost tauntingly. “If all they want to do is cause Ron trouble, then they can clear out.”

Hermione opened her mouth furiously, but Harry cut across her.

“We’re through causing Ron trouble,” he said. “I’ve been trying to tell him that all week, but he walks away before I ever get the chance. So...so when he gets here, just...tell him that Harry and Hermione are sorry...and we miss him. Okay?”

Bridget’s eyes softened significantly despite the lingering distrust on her face.

“I forgive you,” a voice murmured from behind them.

Harry and Hermione both whirled around as Ron slowly edged the portrait open and stepped into the kitchen, his mouth spread in a weak smile.

Harry immediately moved forward, and in a second he and Ron were hugging like brothers, grinning from ear to ear. When they broke apart, Ron was almost thrown off his feet when Hermione abruptly ran to him too, throwing both of her arms around his neck and crying into his shoulder.

“Oh, Ron, I’m *sorry* – I’m *so* sorry, I was – b-being so – *stupid* – and selfish and – ”

“Hey, hey!” Ron said weakly, looking perfectly terrified by Hermione’s reaction. “*Easy*, Hermione, it – wasn’t as bad as all that...”

But her words clearly made him feel better, judging by his over-the-top attempt at sounding casual. He secured an arm around her, squeezing her shoulder in an attempt to comfort her, as he looked up at the others. His fellow chefs were all smiling – not more so than Bridget.

“Good to see you’ve finally made up,” she said.

Hermione blinked through her tears at Bridget, looking flabbergasted. “But – you said – ”

“I figured Ron would be showing up pretty soon,” Bridget said smugly, “so I thought if I put enough pressure on you, you’d just blurt out what needed to be said – and I was right. As usual, the Slytherin outthinks the Gryffindors...”

Ron shot Bridget an attempt at a reproachful glare, but it didn’t succeed, mostly because he couldn’t keep the smile about having his two best friends back off his face.

“Hey, uh,” Ron said to Harry and Hermione awkwardly, “maybe tonight, we can catch up in the common room? I mean, I don’t think you’d want to stick around for our practice – ”

“I’d love to,” Harry cut him off abruptly.

Ron blinked. “You...you would?”

“Well, you’re always so excited talking about them afterwards,” said Harry with a shrug. “This way you won’t have to tell us. That is...if you guys don’t mind having someone to taste things, when you’re done?”

The student chefs glanced around at each other – although Millicent and Daphne didn’t look quite sure, Kevin took charge and immediately answered, “Of course not.”

Ron beamed from ear to ear as Harry pulled up some stools for him and Hermione so they could watch the others cook.

“Oh yeah!” he recalled, “Hermione? I-I told Millicent about S.P.E.W. the other day...”

“You...did?” said Hermione, looking stunned.

“Yeah!” Ron said with a nervous laugh. “She thinks – ”

“Let me take this, Weasley,” Millicent said dryly.

She turned to Hermione, her brown eyes very cold despite how fast she was mixing the batter in the bowl in her hands.

“Granger,” she said curtly. “This organization of yours...is interesting.”

Both Harry and Hermione were taken aback.

“...Really?” said Hermione.

“Interesting, but misguided,” Millicent continued sharply. “Have you talked to any house elves about your movement?”

“Well...yes,” said Hermione awkwardly, but she infused righteousness into her voice, “though thanks to the unjust system they’ve been forced under, they’ve been conditioned into believing that it’s right that they serve masters – ”

To everyone’s surprise, Millicent actually laughed. It was a rough, barking sound – it almost reminded Harry of Sirius.

“Granger, serving is part of the house elves’ *culture*,” said Millicent, her tone rippling with incredulity and dark amusement. “It’s not human conditioning -- it’s their heritage. Don’t you know anything about house elf history?”

Hermione looked startled. “Why...no. There are no books about it in the library – no doubt because no wizard ever thought it was important enough to write down...” she added scornfully under her breath.

Millicent smirked. She poured her dough onto the counter and started molding it, continuing to talk to Hermione even though her eyes were now on her work.

“Here...let me give you a quick run-down.”

As the chefs all worked on their dishes for Hannah, Millicent gave a short lecture about elf history to Hermione, who took it all in with great interest. Hermione asked plenty of questions and put in

suggestions, and Millicent and she continued to discuss the issue on and off throughout the rest of the cooking session. When all the dishes were cooked and packaged up, Harry, Ron, and Hermione hurried back upstairs together, since it was still plenty early enough for them to get up to bed without needing to be Apparated upstairs by any of the house elves.

“I’m sorry I avoided you this whole week,” said Ron lowly. “I guess I was just so depressed, having both of you mad at me, that I sort of buried myself in cooking so I wouldn’t have to think about it...”

“It’s okay,” said Harry.

Hermione smoothed some of her hair behind her ear, smiling at Ron over her shoulder.

“I can see why you like spending time with them, Ron,” she said. “They’re really quite nice – even Bridget’s not all that bad, even if she is a bit shady. And I can’t believe Millicent Bulstrode actually cares about elf rights! I mean – *Millicent Bulstrode*...”

“Yeah,” assented Ron. “Only, try not to broadcast that – from what I gather, most Slytherins have to keep things like that quiet, since they’ve got to share a commonroom with prats like Malfoy...”

For once, Harry completely ignored the introduction of Malfoy into the conversation. Instead he simply wrapped both of his arms around his best friends’ shoulders and walked side by side with them up the stairs toward Gryffindor Tower.

“As nice as they are, Ron...I know you’ll kick every last one of their arses on Friday.”

Round 4: Pre-Heat

Hannah returned to school on Tuesday. Almost the entire student body came by to give her their condolences, which Hannah accepted graciously, but when she ran into Harry, Ron, and Hermione in the hallway one day, she didn't hesitate in striding right over to Ron and giving him a hug.

"Thanks for the chocolate cream pie," she mumbled. "And everything else too, but...Dad really liked the pie."

Ron patted her back lightly. "You're welcome."

When Hannah broke the hug, Hermione took a step forward to stand beside Ron.

"I'm so sorry, Hannah," she murmured. "It wasn't right, what happened...I wish it hadn't."

Hannah smiled sadly. "Thank you – that's kind of you to say."

Harry wanted to give verbal condolences too, but he remembered how much he'd hated everyone doing nothing but walking on eggshells around him after Sirius died – so instead, he changed the subject.

"Have you decided if you still want to do the contest?" he asked gently.

Ron and Hermione seemed concerned that Harry had brought this up, but Hannah instead seemed quite comforted by it.

"I have," she said, a little more of her usual grounded warmth returning to her voice. "I want to go on. I know it'll be hard, but...well, I can't just give up. ...Mum wouldn't have wanted me to do that."

Harry put a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sure she'd be really proud of you."

Hannah's brown eyes flooded with tears. She choked quietly, her smile trembling; then she brought her arms out and gave Harry a big hug too.

"Thank you, Harry," she whispered, clearly touched, as her tears streaked down her cheeks.

On Rose's urging, the student chefs helped Hannah practice in the kitchens over the next two days, to help her get back into the swing of things before the next round.

"Well, there's no way we're going to let you fall behind just because you weren't able to cook with us this last week!" Rose had told Hannah in an almost aggressively positive tone. "I may *look* cute, but don't you *dare* go easy on me – I expect you to beat me into the *ground* with your dishes! Cook me into the grave!"

Rose's fierce encouragement and Hannah's laughter in response to it brightened up the whole kitchen.

When Friday arrived, the entire school was buzzing with excitement. As Ron prepared to head down to the dungeons, Harry and Hermione both gave him a hug and wished him the best of luck. Just as Ron was about to leave, though, Lavender Brown dashed over.

"Good luck today, Ron!" she said breathlessly.

Ron blinked. "Oh, uh – thanks, Lavender..."

"I know you'll be brilliant," she said. "I mean, you *always* are – even when you're at your lowest, you always turn it around!"

Ron attempted a laugh. "Well, uh – "

"And you *never* play it safe," Lavender continued passionately, her words coming together so tightly that it was difficult to get a word in. "That's always been Hannah's problem, I think – she's too careful, in how she cooks – she's a perfectly lovely person, of course, but you've got her beat in the kitchen, no question – "

Harry noticed Hermione's eyes flash as she stepped between Lavender and Ron almost protectively.

"Professor Ramsay will be waiting," she said firmly, resting a hand on Ron's back as she swiveled him around toward the door. "You don't want to be late."

"Oh...y-yeah!" Ron said, and he smiled in relief despite himself.

Hermione gave him the tiniest little shove toward the large open doors, just enough to put some space between them but not forceful in the least.

"Do your best!" she told him, her tone oddly gentle. "Don't worry about winning, just – we'll be proud of you, regardless..."

This startled both Ron and Harry. Hermione was relentless in seeking perfection and top grades in everything, so hearing her being so...well, for lack of a better word, *encouraging*...was a little strange. It made Ron smile so widely that the grin took up almost his entire face, and he backtracked, bringing his arms around Hermione in an even bigger hug and sinking a hand into her bushy hair.

"I will," he whispered.

Both Hermione and Lavender were left a bit flustered when Ron turned and headed out of the Great Hall, though for very different reasons.

That evening the student body once again gathered in the Quidditch pitch, banners in hand. All of the Ravenclaw banners had been edited to solely read "*Astoria is our Ace*"; there was one banner, however, that stood out from the rest. Arjuna carried her own poster decorated with enchanted shooting stars and sparkling gray and baby blue calligraphy that read, "*Go Stori Go!*"

"You know," admitted Ginny, when she noticed Arjuna sitting by herself in the stands, waving her handmade sign, "maybe she's obnoxious when she's winning everything in sight...but at least she's a good friend."

The four judges came out onto the field, once again escorting their house's competitors. Bagnold and Dumbledore now only had one contestant left each (Astoria and Ron), while Hannah and Rose both followed Ramsay and Bridget and Millicent flanked Slughorn on either side. The student chefs were applauded and cheered on by the crowd as they made a line in front of their stations, and the judges stepped forward to address their audience.

"Welcome, everyone, to round four of MagicChef Junior!" proclaimed Bagnold. "We are now half-way through the competition – six marvelous chefs have left our ranks...and now we have but six remaining. Who shall win the title of the very first MagicChef Junior?"

The stands burst into cheers – all the Gryffindors burst into an exhilarated chorus of "*Weasley is Our King.*"

"Today," said Ramsay, "our chefs will be facing a unique challenge. This dish is still quite new to the magical cooking scene, but over the span of a decade, it has already become a staple in wizard-owned restaurants in America and Europe..."

With a wave of his wand, he summoned a large, thin, circular plate to hover over the students' heads, wafting the smell of cheese and tomato into the air.

Harry turned to Ginny, confused. "*Pizza?* But...pizza's not new, it's been around for a long time."

Ginny frowned. "Really? I remember Dad once saying that the Gerardis only opened up their pizzeria in Wandsworth Green after the War was over...I don't know, maybe that wasn't the first one, but I'd always sort of *assumed* it was..."

The rest of the crowd was murmuring too, clearly just as puzzled as Harry and Ginny.

"Pizza has a long history in the Muggle world," said Dumbledore pleasantly, "but has only just recently become popular in the Wizarding World. There are many varieties...but all one truly needs to make a pizza is a dough crust, tomato sauce, and shredded cheese. From there, a chef has a wide swath of toppings to choose from...should they desire any decoration."

"Unfortunately," Ramsay said coolly, "making a good pizza is not as easy as it sounds. There are many different styles, and doing each style justice is a challenge unto itself. No one would accept a New York style pizza with a thick crust...and if you made a round Sicilian pizza, you'd be laughed out of Italy. Today, chefs, you will be assigned a type of pizza and you will have to make us a

delicious, full-size pizza of that type, with your choice of toppings. To make things easier, the dough has already been pre-made by your house elf partners, but everything else – sauce, toppings, cheese, crust thickness, size – is all up to you.”

“Your ovens have been upgraded with Dragonfire wood-burners,” said Slughorn, “specially equipped to bake pizzas to perfection. The chefs who make the two best pizzas for this challenge will receive a special advantage in the elimination round. You will have 30 minutes, and your time starts...*now!*”

The chefs dashed over to their stations. Their house elf partners handed them their cards, and in a flash, they were off, hurrying to prepare their pizzas.

Harry had never made a pizza before, but judging by how much Ron was running around his station, trying to roll out his dough with a rolling pin and cook his sauce at the stove at the same time, Harry decided that he would just stick to going to a pizzeria, rather than trying to make one by hand.

Hermione kept her eye on the other chefs through her Omnioculars.

“Astoria’s sauce looks more like a paste – I don’t think it’s supposed to look like that – Rose’s putting pineapple and ham on hers...I guess she’s making an Hawaiian pizza...?”

After a while, the savory smell of fresh pizzas baking in the oven filled the Quidditch pitch. Even though Harry had already had a delicious dinner feast in the Great Hall less than an hour ago, his stomach gave a low gurgle. As time began to run out, the chefs rushed to get their pizzas out of the oven and cut them up – Rose had some trouble cutting hers up neatly.

After time was called, the pizzas were levitated to the judges’ table one by one, and each chef stepped forward for the judges’ verdict.

Millicent had been assigned a New York style pizza, and she’d topped it with anchovies and tomatoes. The judges praised her dish, though Bagnold pointed out that her crust was just a touch too thick.

Rose had had to make a Greek pizza, but she’d decorated it Hawaiian style, using feta cheese, pineapple, and sliced ham. Ramsay gave Rose a raised eyebrow and a wry smile when he picked up his slice, asking sarcastically if she was aware of the fact that one does *not* put pineapple on

pizza.

Rose grinned from ear to ear. "...Well, *I* did!"

The judges all laughed.

Bridget had been assigned a Neapolitan pizza, and she played it traditionally, topping it only with tomatoes and basil. The judges praised this approach for being very true of a Neapolitan pizza, but unfortunately Bridget had made her pizza a little too big, which resulted in its center being a bit soggy. Despite this minor setback, all four agreed that it was still delicious.

Hannah had been asked to make a New York style pizza, and she'd topped it with pepperoni, basil, oregano, and grated Parmesan cheese. Bagnold in particular complimented her work, saying that it tasted just like the pizzas she'd had when she visited New York City as Minister of Magic.

Astoria had been assigned a Greek pizza, and she had chosen less "adventurous" ingredients than Rose – feta cheese, spinach, olives, and a dash of garlic. All of the judges agreed that Astoria's pizza was easily the best cooked of the day – Ramsay in particular noted how Astoria had even gotten the sauce, which should be more paste-like in a Greek pizza, exactly right.

Finally Ron came forward to face the judges.

"He looks a little nervous," said Hermione.

Harry noticed it too. Ron was smiling, but there was a bit of a tremble in his lips. Harry couldn't see why, though – his pizza looked great!

"Hello, Ron," said Dumbledore.

"Hi, professor," Ron answered nervously.

"Could you tell us, please, what pizza you were assigned, and what you've made for us?"

Ron swallowed.

“...I was assigned a...Neapolitan pizza. I’ve never had one before...but I know in Italy, they like prosciutto...so I’ve made for you an eggplant and prosciutto pizza with mozzarella cheese.”

Each judge took a bite of Ron's pizza – most of them were frowning slightly as they chewed, as if thinking hard.

“...Ron,” Ramsay said at last, “before I say anything else, let me just say that this is a *very* good pizza. Your flavors are wonderful, and I’d be happy to eat the entire thing, if I could. Unfortunately...you did *not* make a Neapolitan pizza. Not only did you add too many toppings for it to be authentic, but also your crust is much too crispy. Did you use a rolling pin?”

Ron flinched. “...Yes, sir.”

“That would do it,” Ramsay said with a curt nod. “Rolling out a pizza too much with a rolling pin presses out all of the lovely air bubbles that make the crust nice and soft. That thin, yet soft crust is what helps define a Neapolitan – the crispier crust makes this much more like a New York style pizza, though quite a bit flimsier than one usually sees...”

Noticing the despondent look on Ron’s face, Slughorn spoke up.

“It’s a *very* tasty pie, young man,” he said kindly. “You should be very proud of what you’ve made. It just doesn’t fill the requirement of this particular challenge.”

Ron gave a weak nod.

“Thank you,” he mumbled halfheartedly.

But he looked no more encouraged as he headed back to his station. Hermione’s hands clenched around her Omnioculars tensely.

“Poor Ron,” she whispered. “Even though the judges liked it, they still had to grade him poorly...”

The judges talked amongst themselves for about ten minutes before they came forward with the results.

“Chefs...you have all done spectacularly in this round,” said Dumbledore. “Every single pizza we tasted today was worthy of a prize – but we can only pick the two best pizzas and give those two chefs the special advantage in the next round. Those two best pizzas were made by...Astoria – ”

Ravenclaw’s stands burst into cheers.

“ – and Hannah.”

The joyful screams coming from the Hufflepuffs quickly overpowered the Ravenclaws. Harry, Ginny, Luna, and Hermione clapped too.

“All right, Hannah!” cried Harry.

Hannah hugged herself tightly, as if trying to keep the glee from bursting out of her chest. Astoria moved forward to give her a hug, which Hannah returned in full. Rose then moved forward to hug Hannah too; Bridget and Ron followed. Millicent didn’t hug Hannah, but she did squeeze her shoulder and whisper her congratulations under her breath.

“We will take a fifteen minute break, and then move onto the elimination round,” Bagnold announced. “Our next challenge will be quite difficult...so chefs, prepare yourselves for a battle.”

Round 4: Elimination

“Chefs,” said Slughorn, “for our elimination challenge today, you will have to make one of my personal favorite holiday treats, which my dear Aunt Aimee made every year when the entire family came to visit her country estate...”

With a wave of his wand, he summoned a table, which carried a large tower of cream puffs stacked high on a plate. Harry had never seen anything like it, though Bridget and Hannah’s faces both lit up at the sight.

“This,” said Slughorn, “is a croquembouche tower. It’s a French dessert that traditionally takes about two days to make. Today, however, you will have only three hours.”

The student chefs exchanged nervous looks.

“Hold on, Horace,” Ramsay added with a wry smile, “we forgot to mention – you won’t be making your towers alone, because this challenge will be...a *team* challenge.”

The crowd started muttering amongst themselves, sounding even more nervous. The student chefs, however, all looked a bit relieved. Some of them, like Rose, were even smiling.

“Astoria, Hannah,” said Ramsay, “you’ll be team captains. You’ll select your teammates and choose a name for yourselves, and hopefully, you’ll then lead that team to victory.”

“At the end of this round...two members of the losing team will be eliminated,” said Dumbledore, “so consider your teammates carefully.”

“We’ll use a coin toss to determine who will pick first,” said Bagnold. She held up a gold Galleon. “Hannah – heads or tails?”

“Heads,” said Hannah quickly.

Bagnold flipped the coin, catching it nimbly on the back of her hand. When she revealed it, the dragon tail was facing up.

“Tails. Astoria, you shall pick first.”

Astoria glanced around at her competition, her light blue eyes contemplative. Finally she looked up at the judges and said quietly,

“...Bridget.”

“Very good,” said Bagnold, as Bridget shifted to stand beside Astoria. “Hannah?”

“Rose,” Hannah said decisively. The Hufflepuff stands applauded as the two girls exchanged smiles.

“Excellent,” said Bagnold. “Astoria?”

Astoria’s eyes drifted between Ron and Millicent, lingering on the second thoughtfully. Ron looked away. He knew full well that he’d screwed up badly in the last round, and it would be more than logical to keep the Slytherins on the same team like Hannah had for Hufflepuff – he didn’t want to hear the inevitable answer –

“...Ron.”

Ron was taken completely aback. So were the people in the stands. Even Bagnold looked a little surprised.

“...All right,” she said, “and that leaves Millicent for Hannah.”

Hannah and Millicent looked quite pleased by this result, exchanging respectful nods.

“Next, you’ll decide your team names, based on a magical creature of your choice,” said Ramsay. “Take a minute, if you need it – ”

“The Dragons,” Astoria said immediately.

Suddenly remembering that she hadn’t asked the others’ opinions, she glanced at Ron and Bridget out the corner of her eye for any objections. They both gave shrugs of mild assent.

“All right, then,” Ramsay said, quirking an eyebrow at Astoria. With a wave of his silver-tipped wand, an icon of a black dragon spewing fire appeared on the front of Ron, Bridget, and Astoria’s aprons.

Hannah whispered quickly to the others – both of them nodded, and Hannah looked up.

“We choose the Unicorns,” she said proudly.

“Unicorns it is,” said Bagnold. With a swish of her wand, an icon of a white, rearing unicorn appeared on the front of the three girls’ aprons.

“Unicorns – Dragons,” proclaimed Dumbledore, “as stated, you shall have three hours to construct a beautiful and delicious croqembouche tower. You shall be judged not just on your finished product, but also on your teamwork. Your time starts...now!”

The two teams ran to their stations. As soon as they arrived at the counter, Astoria turned to Bridget urgently.

“Okay,” she said, “Bridget – what do you know about croqembouche?”

“They’re stuffed cream puffs,” Bridget explained. “The name is French for ‘*cracks in the mouth.*’ They’re made of pate a choux– you know, the stuff you use to make éclairs?”

The other two nodded, encouraging her to go on.

“The finished puffs have a crunchy shell on the outside and they’re hollow on the inside, and you’re supposed to stuff them with a creamy filling...then you stick the puffs together with a caramel drizzle that hardens and keeps them in place.”

“So it’s usually a sweet dessert,” Astoria presumed, her tone very thoughtful.

“Yeah – they’re usually made around Christmas, but sometimes they’re done in place of wedding cakes too.”

Astoria turned to Ron. “Ron – what flavors would you pair with caramel?”

Ron looked startled that Astoria wanted his opinion.

“Well,” he said slowly, “caramel goes with lots of stuff – apple, chocolate, cinnamon – but those are all pretty standard...raspberry would be cool – ”

“Anything savory?” asked Astoria.

Ron frowned in thought. “Mm...well, you could always *caramelize* a meat, I guess...though I don’t know how you’d make that into any kind of cream...”

The gears in his brain were turning quickly. He turned to Bridget.

“...Bridget, do we *have* to use caramel, for this?”

“Caramel is traditional,” Bridget assented. “It’s what sticks everything together so that the tower doesn’t fall apart.”

Ron’s frown grew. He knew he couldn’t afford to go too far a field – he’d made that mistake before. But...

“...Can you add other flavors to the caramel?”

Bridget considered this. “...I guess you could – as long as it’s still sticky and it hardens enough to hold the tower together.”

“And do you *have* to use cream on the inside?” Ron asked, his mind still whirling.

“Well, they *are* called creampuffs – so yeah.”

“Okay...does the cream have to be sweet?”

“I guess not.”

Ron’s face lit up. “...I have an idea! Mum once made these savory creampuffs with a ham, cheese, and cream cheese filling, back when Bill first brought Fleur home. If this is a holiday dessert and we want to make it savory...why don’t we use a ham, cheese, and cream cheese filling? Then we can add honey to the caramel drizzle, and we’ll have a – ”

“ – *Honey-baked ham themed* croqembouche!” finished Bridget, her mouth spreading into a blinding white smile. “Great idea, Ron!”

Astoria’s light blue eyes sparkled – she liked it too.

“All right,” she said in a business-like tone, “the best thing to do is to split up the workload. Ron, you work on the glaze, Bridget, you start the cream, and I’ll do the pate a choux.”

The two teams’ work had begun. It was more grueling than anything they’d done yet, and Harry could see why – in order to make a tower of creampuffs, one needed to make a whole lot of them, and baking them just right was clearly a challenge.

“Looks like Millicent’s puffs are falling apart,” said Hermione, as she watched the Unicorns baking through her Omnioculars. “At least Rose and Hannah are making their own too, so they can pick up her slack...”

On the Dragons’ side, however, there was trouble brewing. Ron seemed to be having trouble getting the right consistency of honey and caramel for his glaze and, when he tested it, it wasn’t hardening properly. Bridget had put down the cream she was working on and had jumped in to help Ron, and this irritated Astoria.

“Bridget, the cream!” she reminded her.

“Ron needs help!” Bridget shot back.

“He’s got it – get back to the cream,” Astoria urged her.

But Bridget was reluctant to go back to her work and kept trying to help Ron put his glaze right. Ron, for his part, looked quite anxious – his eyes were very wide and empty and it seemed like he was barely hearing anything Bridget said.

“He’s panicking,” muttered Harry.

Ginny tried leading the stands in a chorus of “*Weasley is our King*,” but a lot of the spectators were too focused on the flurry of activity to get whipped up into a frenzy.

Astoria, sensing her team was falling apart, put down the dough she was working on and interceded, stepping between Bridget and Ron.

“Time out!” she told both of them sharply. “*Time out.*”

She seized Ron’s arm and yanked him to the side. When they’d distanced themselves enough from the kitchen, she turned to him, her posture strict but her eyes very patient.

“Ron – what’s wrong?”

Ron had gone very pale – his freckles stuck out obnoxiously against his face. “I’m – I’m sorry, I –”

“Don’t apologize, just tell me what you’re having trouble with,” Astoria said patiently.

Ron swallowed. “I – I don’t know, I can’t – I can’t seem to get the balance right – I want to add in

enough honey that the flavor comes through...but if it *doesn't* stick, then our tower won't stay together and it won't be a tower – ”

“It’s okay,” Astoria assured him. “That kind of balance is tricky – you’ll get it – ”

“Of *course* I’d bollocks everything up again, after how bad I did last round,” mumbled Ron. His head had dropped and his red bangs fell into his eyes. “And because of my mistake...now I’ve jeopardized your and Bridget’s places in the contest too! You should never have picked me...”

Astoria’s light blue eyes hardened, but it made them no less calm.

“Ron,” she said quietly, “do you want to know why I picked you?”

Ron didn’t answer. Astoria took his silence as encouragement to go on.

“Because you have something I don’t have. Bridget has the cooking knowledge and experience – but you have the creativity. You think out of the box – maybe in the last round you went too far, but that’s what Bridget and I are here for. If we’re going to win this, we have to think differently than the others – we can’t afford to play it safe, when we’re this close to the end.”

Ron looked up as Astoria grabbed hold of his shoulder.

“I couldn’t be more confident than I am right now working with you and Bridget,” she said with a smile. “I don’t think any of us will leave the contest today.”

Ron, his face still very white, attempted a weak smile. Astoria smiled back as she led him back to Bridget at their kitchen station.

“I think we need a new game plan,” she said. “Bridget – can you bake the pate a choux?”

“Yes.”

“Ron...do you think you can finish Bridget’s filling?”

“Sure...I think I remember how Mum made hers.”

“Then we’ll switch. Ron, you make the filling – Bridget, the pate a choux – and I’ll work on that honey caramel. We only have two hours left, so let’s move!”

After this misstep, the Dragons got right back on track, racing to get their croqembouche done. It seemed that their new jobs suited them much better – even though Astoria was still having some trouble getting the balance right with the honey caramel glaze, she stayed calm. Eventually she decided to add a little honey extract to add in more of the flavor without sacrificing the consistency of the caramel.

Meanwhile Bridget had started filling the puffs with Ron’s cream and stacking them. She noticed the Unicorns were all filling and stacking creampuffs of various sizes and dusting them with powdered sugar.

“We need to figure out how we’re decorating this,” she told the others.

Ron glanced over as the Unicorns’ unfinished tower. *‘They seem to be doing some sort of a snowy theme...’*

“...If this is a holiday dessert,” he said slowly, “why don’t we make ours a Christmas tree? The tower Slughorn showed us already sort of looked like a tree...”

Astoria’s face brightened with a huge smile. “...And the creampuffs can be our Christmas baubles! Ron, that’s brilliant!”

Ron flushed with pride.

Bridget and Ron got to work enchanting the puffs different colors. At one point Bridget paused, creampuff in hand, and turned to Ron with a grin.

“Hey, I know...let’s make the *‘baubles’* our secondary house colors – gold, bronze, and silver! That’ll make ‘em nice and shiny. Then we can airbrush the rest green by hand, to give it that texture.”

“Great idea!” said Ron.

Astoria had just finished the caramel glaze and she brought it over to sit on the stove next to their incomplete tree.

“If we’re making this a tree,” she said, “we’ll need some sort of decoration for the top. It looks like the other team is baking cookie snowflakes for theirs – we could always bake something for the top...”

Ron’s eyes lit up with another thought. “Or...we could use candied sugar! A candy star would be a great topping.”

“We haven’t had the chance to show off any sugar work yet,” agreed Astoria. “Can you work with candied sugar, Bridget?”

“Sort of,” said Bridget uncomfortably. “I’ve only done it once...but if I had a mold, I could manage it.”

“Okay,” said Astoria. “Now that I’m done with the glaze, Ron and I can take care of the tower – that leaves you, Bridget, open to work on the star.”

Bridget turned to her button-nosed elf partner. “Hardy, could you find me a star mold?”

“Right away, Miss Bridget,” he said in a slightly lower voice than the other elves, and he disappeared with a *crack*. Bridget got to work on her candied sugar mixture at the stove.

When the mixture had come to a boil, Astoria and Ron were just about done stacking all the puffs when Hardy returned. They were startled to find, however, that the elf’s brown eyes were full of tears.

“Hardy looked *everywhere* for the star mold,” he said hopelessly. “*Everywhere* – then Joly told Hardy that they got rid of the old one because it was broken.”

The Dragons exchanged anxious looks. Then, almost as a unit, they looked up at the clock – there was only ten minutes remaining – there wasn't any time to bake any cookies now.

"Don't worry about it!" Bridget told them sharply. "I'll think of something – you guys just finish decorating that tower!"

Astoria and Ron had no choice but to trust Bridget – they returned to the tower, while Bridget turned to Hardy.

"Hardy, could you get me a pair of thick dragon hide gloves and a star cookie stencil?"

"Yes, Miss Bridget!"

Crack. Bridget grabbed a piping bag and cut a hole in the top. About a minute later, Hardy had returned with both of the items Bridget had requested. Putting the gloves on, Bridget then proceeded to pour her boiling hot sugar candy mixture into the piping bag and used the cookie stencil as a guide of how to shape her star, which was about three sizes bigger. Her face was contorted with pain as she worked, but she pressed on stubbornly.

"Five minutes!" Ramsay called.

Both stations were working like crazy. Bridget had just finished filling in her star – her hands throbbing with hot pain, she stepped back, trying to collect herself. Astoria and Ron dashed over to her.

"Bridget, are you okay?" Ron asked.

Bridget forcefully breathed in and out. "I'm okay – I'm okay – "

Astoria helped her take off her gloves, as Bridget was in too much pain to do it herself. Her hands had a few small, ugly-looking calluses on the sides of her fingers.

"Hardy, get Madame Pomfrey!" said Astoria, her voice panicked yet urgent.

“No!” Bridget argued. “Don’t go, Hardy, I’m fine – ”

“Don’t be daft, those are second degree burns!” Astoria shut her down. “Hardy, get Madame Pomfrey *now*.”

Hardy inclined his head respectfully to Astoria and quickly disappeared.

“But – ” said Bridget, “the star’s not done – ”

“We’ve got it,” Ron assured her.

He took out his wand, pointing it at the candy star and casting the charm “*Velox Frigus!*” A controlled mist started flowing out his wand like dry ice, slowly cooling down the candied sugar so it could harden.

Hardy returned with Madame Pomfrey less than a minute later. At the sight of the nurse, Ramsay dashed over to their station as well.

“Bridget, are you all right?” he asked urgently.

“I’m fine – ” she attempted.

“Shut it, Bridget, you’re *not* fine,” Ron cut her off, though his tone was hard with concern.

Madame Pomfrey immediately set to work applying some healing potion to Bridget’s burned fingers with a cotton ball.

“You’ve done enough, Bridget,” Astoria reproached her, though her voice was still gentle enough that it was clear that she admired Bridget’s effort. “We’ll handle the rest.”

Ramsay nodded to Astoria and Ron. “See that you do...and Bridget,” he turned to her more gently,

“take a breath. You’re okay.”

As Bridget reluctantly sat with Madame Pomfrey, Astoria and Ron worked on the finishing touches for their croqembouche tree, airbrushing texture, adding in some edible glitter, and securing the yellow sugar candy star to the top. It was a little small for the size of the tree, but there was no time to make it bigger – if Ron tried using an Engorgement Charm, he ran the risk of shattering it.

Finally the round came to an end, and the two teams stepped up to face the judges.

The Unicorns’ croqembouche had turned out beautifully. It was themed for a “Winter Wonderland,” with powdered sugar and iced snowflake sugar cookies as decoration. The creampuffs themselves were stuffed with a sweet apple and vanilla filling that Slughorn said was just like the sort his aunt used to make. About the only criticism that any of the judges could offer was that the creampuffs were a little inconsistent, all being different sizes and with varying amounts of cream inside.

The Dragons’ croqembouche turned out pretty well, as far as Ron was concerned. It really looked a lot like a Christmas tree with shiny bronze, silver, and gold baubles and a slightly-too-small star on top. Bridget’s hands were healed, but she still kept them pretty close to her chest – likely they were still twitching with pain.

“Hello, Dragons,” greeted Slughorn.

“Hello, sir,” the three replied in broken unison.

“Astoria...could you please tell us about what you’ve made?”

Astoria took a step forward.

“We’ve made for you a savory croqembouche Christmas tree, with flavors inspired by a honey-baked ham. The creampuffs are filled with a ham, cheese, and cream cheese filling, the tower is covered with a honey caramel drizzle, and we decorated the puffs to look like Christmas baubles and added a handmade sugar candy star on top.”

The judges sampled the creampuffs in front of them. When Slughorn bit into his, however, he

frowned deeply.

“...I don’t know,” he said broodingly, “how I feel about this...”

He continued to eat it. The Dragons all held their breath.

“...You know,” he said slowly, “...I think I might love this.”

The Dragons let out a huge sigh of relief, their faces breaking out into smiles.

“In fact,” Slughorn said brightly, “can someone pass me another? I’d like another!”

“Your design is really *very* creative,” said Bagnold, as Dumbledore handed Slughorn another puff.

“I saw ‘*Christmas tree*’ long before you said it, Astoria – I can definitely see those shiny puffs as your ornaments, and I love your star.”

“You put a lot into that star, Bridget, and your passion shows through,” Dumbledore said gently.

“Excellent work.”

Bridget grinned, her white teeth shining. “Thank you, sir.”

“I admit, the star is small,” said Ramsay, “and not all your puffs have the same amount of cream – I notice the one Horace is eating right now has a lot more than the one I had,” he indicated the puff that Slughorn was enjoying, “but overall, a beautiful dish. Well done.”

“Thank you,” said Astoria, and she, Ron, and Bridget shared smiles.

The judges took a whole half hour to discuss the results. It left both the stands and the contestants waiting on tenterhooks, looking around at each other nervously.

“I wonder what they’re saying,” said Harry.

“It’s probably a really difficult decision,” said Ginny. “I mean...I have no idea who I’d cut, at this point – they all did really well. It’ll probably come down to the tiniest details...”

Hermione bit her lip anxiously, her brown eyes locked on Ron. Finally the judges came forward with their decision.

“Today we were faced with two perfectly gorgeous croqembouche towers,” pronounced Dumbledore. “In any other competition, both these entries would have won their team the whole lot...but alas, we were only allowed to select one. This team was chosen as our winner not just because of their tower, but also the teamwork they showed despite immense adversity. The winner of this challenge is...”

The contestants and spectators alike all held their breath.

“...The Dragons.”

Ron felt like he was going to collapse. Bridget threw both arms into the air and screamed, “YEAAAAAH!” at the top of her lungs. Astoria brought her arms around both of her teammates, and the three came together in a huddle-like hug. Meanwhile both the Gryffindor and Ravenclaws stands burst into applause, delighted that both of their contestants were safe.

“Dragons,” Dumbledore continued, when the noise had died down, “you took an *immense* risk with your savory croqembouche tower and it more than paid off. You pushed each other further than any of you could have gone on your own, and it resulted in a beautiful, daring dessert.”

“That leaves,” Ramsay said lowly, “the Unicorns.”

There was a chill in the air that had not been there before as all eyes turned toward the other team. All of them looked like they were in line for the gallows – like they had expected such a result, but were no more ready for it.

“I’ll be honest, girls,” Bagnold said sadly, “this was a very, *very* hard decision. If I had my way, we would not be eliminating two people from the same team this week...but alas, those were the ground rules we established before the round began...”

“Minister,” Hannah burst out suddenly, looking upset, “please save Rose or Millicent.”

Everyone stared at Hannah, startled. She had started to cry.

“I led the team,” she said in a choked voice, “therefore our loss is *my* fault, not theirs – ”

“Hannah, don’t.”

Rose took Hannah’s hand – Hannah turned to her, tears still stuck to her eyelashes.

“Two of us have to go this week, and the judges have already decided who those two are,” Rose said firmly, as she offered Hannah a weak smile. “You’re not to blame – we were a team, remember? There’s no ‘*T*’ in ‘*team*.’ And no matter who stays and who goes...we’re still the Unicorns! And I know whoever goes will support whoever stays...with all their hearts!”

Millicent nodded in mute agreement, her eyes softer than usual in her gaze upon Hannah. Hannah’s eyes flooded with even more tears; she took both of her teammates’ hands, squeezing them tightly. Slughorn actually had to covertly wipe a tear from his eye as well.

“...The two chefs,” Bagnold said at last, though her voice was clearly pained as well, “who will be leaving us today are...Rose and Millicent.”

Hannah covered her face with both hands and burst into sobs. Rose and Millicent, who looked like they’d expected that result, both moved forward and brought their arms around Hannah to comfort her.

“Hufflepuff...Slytherin – please applaud your student chefs.”

And they did. They applauded very loudly, as the Dragons moved forward to comfort the Unicorns as well. And for that moment, it was like everyone had forgotten this was supposed to be a competition – there was so much genuine affection between these supposed-rivals that it felt like any loss was an injustice and like every single chef ought to be a winner.

The Editorial

Valentine's Day was coming up. Although Harry only had eyes on the 14th because it was the date for the next MagicChef round, there was some excitement in the air from the female members of the student body. Hermione had already had to confiscate several bottles of love potion in less than two days – one of them she snatched right out of a Gryffindor underclassman's hands during breakfast Sunday morning as soon as it arrived via owl post.

"Trust me, Harry," she'd said coolly, after Harry had quirked an eyebrow at her. "If you'd heard *half* the stuff Romilda Vane was saying she wanted to do with you yesterday, you would've done the same thing."

Harry frowned, but decided to go back to reading the *Daily Prophet* rather than answer. Hermione turned to Ron.

"Ron, you *really* should tell Fred and George to be more careful about the people they sell their love potions to," she told him solemnly.

"Oh yeah, *that* would work," Ron said sarcastically. "'Say, Fred, George, I was thinking – maybe you should do a background check on absolutely everyone who tries to buy one of your love potions, just to make sure that they don't do something stupid.' 'Gee whiz, Ron, that's a bloody fantastic idea! I mean, sure, we get lots of money selling those potions, but it makes perfect sense to spend all of those profits investigating every customer buying our product and in the process warding them off from buying anything else...'"

"Ron, I'm *serious*," Hermione retorted impatiently. "A love potion in the wrong hands could cause a lot of trouble – just look at Voldemort's parents!"

"Could you *not* use the name?" moaned Ron, clapping both hands over his ears and scowling at her. "And even if they sometimes cause problems, that's not going to stop Fred and George – they're not going to be warded off by the risk of upsetting somebody..."

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but at that moment Harry rather abruptly slammed the *Daily Prophet* down on the table, looking furious.

"Guys, read this."

Ron and Hermione swiveled around to get a better look at the article Harry had rested his hand under, which was in the *Opinion* section of the paper, toward the back.

(cont. from page 3) outside papers have been asking a question that this paper has yet to touch upon – the correlation between magical talent and ancestry.

Now of course, no one is arguing that magical children from Muggle families (often called “Muggle-borns”) are any less deserving of education or cannot, in some cases, go on to become respectable figures in the Wizarding World. Some anonymous sources from inside the Department of Mysteries, however, have admitted to studies into what prompts the emergence of magical children from non-magical families, and even after over 100 years of research, they have yet to find any concrete answer for where such magic may originate. These same anonymous sources also reveal that many studies reveal an odd discrepancy in how many students from Muggle families go on to earn positions of power in the Wizarding World compared to students from purely magical ones. At Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, we’ve seen new evidence of this discrepancy in its amateur cooking competition hosted by Gordon Ramsay, the foul-mouthed head chef of Hell’s Kitchen. Of the final four contestants, three of them are from magical families that can be found amongst the ranks of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. Is it not conceivable, therefore, that students from Muggle families have a genetic disposition that puts them at a disadvantage compared to those from magical families?

Now I’m sure many people will say, “Oh, but I know a Muggle-born who is unbelievably talented at magic!” But such a sentiment only proves the unusual nature of your experience – after all, if there were so many talented Muggle-borns, why would they not be better known? The fact that we associate them more with Muggles than with our magical world by calling them “Muggle-borns” says more than enough, I think.

In conclusion, I write this as a humble request to the Minister of Magic – Minister Scrimgeour, in the light of the Dark Lord’s return and persecution of “Muggle-borns,” can you not do more about these vulnerable members of our society?

Hermione’s mouth had dropped open in disbelief. Ron looked furious.

“What – the – *BLOODY HELL* is that?!” he roared. His face was beet red and his teeth were bared like he was a mad dog. “‘Vulnerable members of our society’ – who wrote this shite?!”

“Some prat called Uric Cuffe,” Harry snarled. “I think he’s related to the editor – Slughorn mentioned some other Cuffe who was a member of the Slug Club back in the day...”

Hermione picked up the paper, flipping to the front of the article.

“...‘*Uric Cuffe, 28 years, Hogwarts alumnus of house Gryffindor, is Head Reporter and Correspondent for the freelance paper The Stormer,*’” she read his biography aloud, her eyebrows coming together in confusion. “I’ve never heard of that paper before...”

“That’s because it’s *garbage!*” Ron burst out furiously. “It’s this anti-Muggle conspiracy paper – like the *Quibbler*, except worse! It likes to blame every single problem the Wizarding World’s had in the last decade on the friction between wizards and Muggles! Merlin, no wonder that editorial is such a piece of –”

Hermione tried desperately to quiet Ron’s tirade, as the next flurry of swears out of his mouth could’ve put Ramsay to shame.

“I don’t even get it,” said Harry. “What was the *Prophet* thinking, publishing something that stupid? I mean, no one thinks that you, Hannah, and Astoria got this far in the contest because of your blood – everyone knows it’s based on talent!”

“Right!” Ron snarled in agreement. “And Bridget’s a better, more experienced chef than I’ll ever be!”

“Clearly everyone *doesn’t* know that, though,” Hermione said lowly, and her voice rippled with both sorrow and righteous fury. “I mean – you see what this person’s arguing, right? Not as many Muggle-borns get positions of power in the Wizarding World – even if that *is* true, that isn’t necessarily because of blood – it could be about dormant prejudices that no one wants to talk about...ones that could also explain why many great Muggle-born witches and wizards aren’t better known...and yet Cuffe is using it to prove his argument about blood purity.”

Harry slapped a hand on the article and crumpled it up in one hand, his green eyes blazing behind his round glasses.

“Well, he wrote that trash for nothing,” he said coldly. “There’s no way anyone could be stupid enough to believe that...”

Unfortunately Harry was wrong. Cuffe’s editorial had gotten everyone in the school talking that day, and although it angered most of the student body, there were a few who reacted differently.

Some seemed to think that Cuffe's words were being taken out of context.

"He's just *worried* about them, that's all," one Hufflepuff argued. "If Muggle-borns *do* have weaker magic than Purebloods, then we do need to do something about it..."

Others got mad, but still thought that maybe Cuffe had a point.

"I mean, clearly, saying that Muggle-borns are genetically poorer at magic than Purebloods is silly," one Ravenclaw said, "but he *is* right, I mean, they *should* get special protection from the Ministry...and, well, they're *not* going to be as good at magic as Purebloods are, considering the lack of magical support they get from their families..."

But this was *nothing* compared to the students who openly used the article to prop up their personal prejudices. Hermione and Harry had had to grab hold of Ron's arms and hold him back to keep him from hexing the Slytherin Quidditch Captain when he heard him theorizing to the rest of his team that the only reason Uric Cuffe hadn't just come out and used the "proper" word ("*Mudblood*") was because his uncle Barnabas, who edited the *Prophet*, had made him censor himself.

"The worst part is," Ron growled to Harry and Hermione as they left Charms, "I have a bad feeling that he might be right..."

Colin walked past them at that moment, only he seemed not see them; his brown eyes glared furiously at his feet as he walked.

"Colin?" Ron called after him when Colin had strolled past them without a word.

Colin looked up, startled. At the sight of them, he attempted a smile.

"Oh, ah...hi, Ron! Hi, Harry...Hermione. H-how's it going?"

Ron noticed a twitch in Colin's smile – the boy was clearly upset.

"Colin, are you okay?"

“Oh...yeah, I’m fine,” Colin said quickly, but Ron didn’t believe him, given that he immediately turned away and his tone took on a faintly cold edge. “Just fine...”

Ron exchanged a concerned look with Hermione out the corner of his eye.

“Colin...” Hermione attempted weakly, “you seem a little, um...upset.”

“Me? Upset?” asked Colin, his voice rising with a rather unpleasant, slightly higher-pitched passive-aggressiveness. “Why would I be *upset*? I mean, there’s nothing going on right now that could make me *upset* – no stupid, brainless, *badly-edited article* that rants about how people from non-magic families are these *fragile flowers* who need protection – ”

“Colin, that article was garbage,” Harry cut him off firmly. “Anyone with a brain knows that.”

Colin gave a loud, sarcastic laugh. “*HA!* You’d *think* that, wouldn’t you?! Yet I still have to listen to our *precious* Head Boy try to tell me that Cuffe was right – that I’m never going to be as powerful as people from magical families are and so I shouldn’t even *try* to fight You-Know-Who when I graduate – because I *needed protection from the Heir of Slytherin, right? Right?!*”

Colin’s bile left Harry, Ron, and Hermione stunned.

“I shot a Head-Shrinking Hex at him, so his head would better suit the size of his brain,” he grumbled, as he choked back bitter, frustrated tears, “but Professor McGonagall caught me and gave me detention. She wanted to know why I did it, but...I don’t *want* to explain! Because she’ll *never* know why I did it – she *has* magical blood! She’s never had to listen to people tell her that her parents are worthless just because they don’t have magic! She doesn’t know what it’s like, having to live a secret life that you have to hide from *absolutely everyone* back home! How could *she* know how I feel?!”

There was a silence. Ron glanced at Harry and Hermione, unsure of what to say. Hermione finally stepped forward and brought her arms around Colin in a hug – it wasn’t difficult, given that he was only an inch taller than her.

“I know how you feel,” she said quietly.

Colin didn't hug her back, but he clearly appreciated the gesture as he closed his eyes and his angry tears streaked down his face.

Colin wasn't the only one upset by Uric Cuffe's editorial. Hermione told Harry and Ron after Arithmancy that she saw that Justin Finch-Fletchley -- a Hufflepuff in their year who also took the class -- was mysteriously absent, and that she had overheard Susan Bones telling a friend that Justin claimed he wasn't feeling well and had gone back to his dorm.

"The worse part was that Susan's friend actually tried to suggest that Justin doesn't have to take what Cuffe said personally," Hermione muttered furiously, as they headed into the Great Hall for lunch. "I mean -- how can you *not*? He said that Muggle-born students are generally weaker than Purebloods are -- how can that *not* be taken personally?"

Harry shook his head as they sat down at the Gryffindor table together.

"I just don't get it," mumbled Ron angrily. "Where are all these rats *coming* from, all of a sudden? Everyone's getting along fine; then one person says something stupid, and suddenly everyone's turning into an as --"

Before Ron could finish, though, he was interrupted by a loud, shrill cackle of laughter.

The three turned to look at the Slytherin table -- Pansy Parkinson was talking loudly with a cluster of other Slytherins, including Blaise Zabini, Crabbe, Goyle, Montague, and Tracey Davis.

"And -- and that little addendum," mocked Pansy. "'*Now of course Muggle-borns are no less deserving of education*' -- sure, but *what* education? I daresay there are a few lessons we could teach the filth around here, about respecting their betters --"

Ron made as if to stand, but Hermione seized his arm with both hands and pulled him back down.

"Don't," she whispered, squeezing his arm tightly. "Don't bother --"

"He clearly censored himself a lot, to get even *that* much to print," said Tracey dully. "I mean, we all know how much the *Prophet* has been shutting out all free thought in favor of their so-called '*news*' promoting Scrimgeour's pro-Muggle agenda..."

“Yeah,” snorted Goyle.

“Well, with Cuffe getting that in print, maybe more people will think to go back to the source,” said Zabini with a wry smirk.

“Right!” laughed Crabbe stupidly. “Then they’ll get the *real* story, not that stuff the *Daily Puppet* puts out...”

Bridget entered the Hall, walking past the group of sixth year Slytherins to take a seat by herself at the end of the table, about a yard away. Pansy and her friends all watched her go like cats hungrily watching a bird landing on a nearby branch.

“Honestly,” said Pansy, her voice taking on a melodramatic tone that could’ve put Malfoy to shame, “now that Daphne and Millicent are out of the running, I frankly don’t *want* Slytherin to win.”

Bridget stiffened slightly from her place at the table.

“Neither do I,” said Zabini coolly, his eyes flickering over to Bridget. Like Pansy, he made sure that his voice was more than easy enough to hear from far away. “After all, Slytherin has *standards* – we shouldn’t be expected to shout the praises of just *anyone*. I mean, could you imagine us putting a trophy for someone named ‘*Jaheem*’ in our commonroom?”

“Yeah,” said Montague cruelly, “who’s ever heard of ‘*Jaheem*?’”

Crabbe and Goyle snorted in stupid laughter. Bridget was clearly trying to ignore them; although her grip on her fork tightened slightly, she didn’t answer or even look up.

“At this rate, we should just support Astoria,” said Tracey lightly. “I mean, she *is* Daphne’s sister...and she’s a *pureblood*, unlike that half-blood Abbott...”

“And she’s not a blood traitor like Weasley,” added Montague.

“True,” said Zabini. “After all, what joy could we find in victory, if it’s at the hands of a Mudblood who cheated her betters out of their rightful prize?”

Ron abruptly shot to his feet, pulling himself out of Hermione’s grip, and stormed over, yanking his wand out as he went.

“Ron, *no!*” yelled Hermione.

But it was too late – Ron had grabbed Zabini by the back of his robes, roughly pulled him to his feet, and stuck his wand in his face.

“*Take that back!*” he spat furiously.

The other Slytherins shot to their feet too. Bridget whirled around to look up at Ron and Zabini, her black eyes very wide.

“Take *what* back?” hissed Zabini, and his lips curled into a sneer. “The bit about you being a blood traitor, or about how you desperately want to screw a Mudblood pig? Oh wait, I only *thought* that last one – ”

Ron’s wand flared with dangerous red sparks.

“Ron, *stop!*” cried Hermione. Harry dashed to Ron’s side, pulling his wand out as well.

“*Enough!*”

Snape had arrived. Harry stopped mid-run, ending up just behind Ron, as the Defense Against Dark Arts professor swept over, his black robes billowing.

“Put Zabini down, Weasley,” he spat.

Ron looked like he dearly wanted to tell Snape to go take a hike, but he decided against it, releasing Zabini’s robes but glaring at him fiercely.

“50 points from Gryffindor, I’d say, for that lack of decorum,” Snape sneered.

“Only if we also take 50 points from Slytherin for instigating that ‘*lack of decorum*’ in the first place.”

Ramsay had come down from the staff table and stopped on the other side of the students, his blue eyes flashing at Snape significantly over their heads.

“I may not have heard the entire argument,” he said coldly, his arms crossed over his chest, “but I know that Ron was not unprovoked in his reaction – after all, I doubt even *you* would condone the use of *that word*...right, Snape?”

Although Snape’s face remained as stony as ever, there was a strange flicker in his cold black eyes that Harry had never seen before.

“...Very well,” Snape said begrudgingly.

He flashed an unpleasant look at Zabini, as if silently reproaching his student, and then glared at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

“Back to your table – now.”

Harry and Hermione reluctantly headed back to the Gryffindor table. Ron took a little longer, as he turned to look at Bridget. Bridget, however, was avoiding his gaze – her black eyes were locked on the plates of food stacked high in front of her.

“*Now*, Weasley,” snapped Snape.

Ron glowered at Slytherin’s Head of House, but reluctantly obeyed and slumped away. He had never felt more cowardly in his life than he did migrating back to the Gryffindor table like a dog with his tail between his legs.

Blow-Up in the Breakroom

By the time Monday was over, Harry felt physically ill. It was like the disgust he had felt after first reading the editorial was bleeding through his pores like mud. It left him feeling just as gross as all the students who had given Cuffe any molecule of credit...and the feeling only got worse over the course of the next two days.

On Tuesday, there was a tussle between a pair of Gryffindor first years (one Pureblood and one Muggle-born) where the Muggle-born decided to prove he *was* good at magic by trying to Switch the other boy's head with his rear-end, only for both boys to end up in the Hospital Wing stuck together. Later that same day another Muggle-born ended up losing Ravenclaw 50 points after hexing a classmate who insinuated that because she'd done most of the work in their paired assignment, the Muggle-born should have to pay her back. Then, during lunch on Wednesday, Hannah blew up at the Hufflepuff table, screaming through angry tears at Ernie Macmillan that she didn't *want* his support, if he thought that she would win because of her blood and not her cooking talent.

"Brainless prat," muttered Ron. "Probably thought that he was being *encouraging*, by saying her competition had no chance against her..."

He looked for Bridget at the Slytherin table, but she was nowhere to be found. The student chefs had all met down in the kitchens on Monday night as usual, but for the first time, Bridget had not shown up. At the time Ron had interrogated Daphne and Millicent about how Bridget was doing, but they couldn't offer much.

"But...but you're in her *house*," Ron had implored them. "You had to have seen her!"

"Of *course* we saw her," Millicent answered dully.

"Well, how *was* she? Did she look okay? Was she upset? Mad?"

"She acted like she was fine, when I talked to her," Daphne said, "but that doesn't mean a thing, to a Slytherin. We always put our best face forward. If we're upset, most of us don't feel like letting the world know it – unless you're Draco, but even *he's* been going off by himself a lot this year – "

"But – can't you *tell*, if she's putting on airs? If you guys do it – "

“Ron,” Daphne had cut him off, her voice unusually gentle, “just because you put on a mask everyday doesn’t mean you can see through everyone else’s.”

Feeling despondent, Ron turned to the Ravenclaw table and found Astoria. She and Arjuna had rather pointedly placed themselves at the far end, so as to avoid Pansy and her friends sitting at the Slytherin table, but Ron couldn’t help but notice how unhappy Astoria looked at all the attention she was receiving. There was a group of Ravenclaw girls who had gathered around Astoria but seemed to have no idea just how uncomfortable their presence made her.

“She must feel awful,” Hermione whispered, when she noticed where Ron was looking. “I mean – how must it feel, to know that people only want you to do well because you winning would prove their gross theories about blood purity?”

“I know,” muttered Harry. “Who’d want to win with *that* hanging over your head?”

Arjuna abruptly got to her feet at that moment, her black eyes flashing furiously.

“You *shallow-minded doxies!*” she snapped, her voice raising enough that everyone could now hear her. “Believe anything you read, do you? Or do you just believe it if it gets published in the *Daily Prophet*? Did you learn *nothing* from Fudge covering up You-Know-Who’s return last year?!”

Astoria tried to soothe her by grabbing hold of her arm, but Arjuna yanked out of her grip, getting right up in the other Ravenclaw girls’ faces with ferocity.

“My father *works* in the Department of Mysteries! He may not talk about his work at home, but I know for a fact that the studies they work on are about the advancement of magic as a whole – *not* to bolster bogus theories about magical eugenics!”

“No offense, Arjuna,” their button-nosed, blond dormmate Hilary Erskine said solemnly, “but anything *you* claim we sort of have to take with a grain of salt, given your track record with the truth – ”

Astoria opened her mouth, looking furious as well. Before she could speak, however, a very tall figure stepped in and not so subtly shoved his way into the crowd of girls, making them scatter so as to not get trodden upon.

“Ladies, I think it’s time all of you clear out before I decide to *make* you,” Eddie Carmichael told the underclassmen coolly.

“Wha – is that a *threat*?” stammered Hilary, clearly trying to sound brave, but only giving a pitiful attempt at righteous fury.

Carmichael fixed her with a perfectly fearless look, his hazel eyes narrowing slightly. Hilary visibly trembled.

“Why yes,” he said lowly. “I suppose it is.”

The girls exchanged looks among themselves, before the group reluctantly dissolved and they all went their separate ways. Carmichael glanced over his shoulder at Astoria.

“You okay, Greengrass?”

Astoria frowned at him. “Why did you do that?”

“Here I thought there’d be only two possible answers to my question, yes or no,” Carmichael said sardonically, “yet it seems you’ve thought of a third one – ignoring the question all together.”

Astoria’s light blue eyes narrowed slightly. Carmichael turned around to face her better.

“I saw those girls bothering you and I wanted to help, that’s all.”

“We could’ve handled it on our own,” muttered Astoria.

“Never said you couldn’t,” Carmichael said lightly.

“Yet you still felt the need to stick your nose where it didn’t belong,” Arjuna shot back coolly.

Carmichael crossed his arms. “Look, Belaji, I know we’ve never gotten on – ”

“Oh, is *that* what you call Transfiguring my braids into candle wax in my first year just to prove you could?” Arjuna snorted derisively.

“Fine, I’ve been a prat, I’ll buy that,” Carmichael said dully, “but whatever you think of me, I know for a fact that you guys did well in the contest because you put in the work, not because of any specialness in your family tree. As far as I’m concerned,” he glanced at Astoria, “anyone who tries to put you up on a pedestal for being a pureblood is doing you a disservice. And maybe you can handle those jerks on your own...but, for what it’s worth, you shouldn’t have to...and I don’t want to sit down and be quiet.”

Astoria and Arjuna both stared at Carmichael, stunned, as he turned and started walking back up the table to rejoin his crowd of friends. Then Arjuna turned to Astoria, a faint smile dusting her lips.

“...Well! I wasn’t expecting *that*.”

“Me either,” agreed Astoria uncomfortably. “Thanks for what you said too, by the way.”

“How could I do anything else?” said Arjuna dismissively. “They were being *completely* obtuse – and there’s no way I’d let them badmouth Bridget and Hannah in front of you – I know how much you like spending time with them...”

She lightly bumped her shoulder up against Astoria’s, her smile becoming a little softer.

“*Someone’s* got to protect that sensitive heart of yours – at least until you finally find that Prince Charming I keep seeing in your Tarot readings.”

Astoria bit back a laugh.

“...Thanks, R.J.”

As much as the voices disgusted by Cuffe’s article outnumbered those who defended it, it still

seemed as though that minority was a vocal thorn in the side of everyone else. Even the teachers got fed up with it. Professor McGonagall had taken to patrolling the halls more and had successfully stopped about ten more incidents before they started. Professor Flitwick had taken to inviting Muggle-born students to his office for a cup of herbal tea and some of his homemade Cheering-Charm-infused sugar biscuits. Professor Burbage had given her Muggle Studies classes the assignment of writing a short paper debunking Cuffe's theory and had offered extra credit to those students who sent a copy of it to the *Prophet* via owl post. And for the first time in Harry's memory, Snape was actively bullying his own students in Slytherin – when he caught them using the word “Mudblood,” he'd pull them to the side and threaten to put them in detention for a month if he heard it from them again.

Considering the reputations each member of the staff had built up at school, however, it was unsurprising that the teacher who *really* went off the deep-end in his temper was Professor Ramsay.

It all started when Slughorn and Bagnold had arrived that Thursday in preparation for the next round. No one had really given the two judges' arrival much thought until they, Ramsay, and Dumbledore went into the teachers' breakroom to chat about the upcoming round and, within twenty minutes, had entered into a heated discussion that made Ramsay's voice echo with perfect clarity through the closed door.

“HAD A *POINT*?”

Harry had been walking down the hall with Ron and Hermione at the time and, upon recognizing Ramsay's voice, stopped where he was, trying to listen. Ron and Hermione stopped just ahead of him, turning around and quieting as well.

“Horace, are you bloody *daft*?!”

Harry migrated over to the teachers' breakroom, standing beside the closed door to listen. Ron darted over to the other side of the door, while Hermione hesitantly hid on Harry's other side.

“Gordon, calm down,” Bagnold's voice came through the door, sounding a little anxious but staying firm.

“Don't tell me to calm down when I'm stuck listening to some *brain-dead donkey* try to argue that it's *perfectly acceptable* to make sweeping claims about an entire group of people based solely on their fucking ancestry!”

“Gordon, that’s not what I meant!” Slughorn said shakily. “After all, Uric even s-says there are exceptions – but if the Department of Mysteries has done studies – ”

“*Fuck me!*” Ramsay bellowed. “You can’t tell me you actually believe *that* shite, about *studies*?! *The Stormer*’s claimed that crap for *years*, saying they’ve got this *precious* anonymous source from the Department of Mysteries who’s happy to divulge his secrets to them, because *they’ll* tell the world the truth – yeah, well, it’s crystal-fucking-clear that the only reason that source says he’s from the Department of Mysteries is because we won’t bloody well question why he’s *fucking anonymous!*”

“Gordon, *please!*” Bagnold said loudly, in a vain attempt to restore calm. “That information rings with at least *some* truth – I remember there was a study done just before I resigned, and it found that Muggle-borns often end up in jobs that require less magical talent – ”

“A later study of the same variety, however,” Dumbledore said coolly, “found that those Muggle-borns often had earned the same amount of NEWTs as so-called ‘*Purebloods*’ who had ended up in higher positions – sometimes more.”

“Regardless,” said Bagnold, though she sounded a bit flustered, “the point still stands that there *is* a correlation – one that’s worth discussing, whatever the cause – and even if the editorial itself has little value, it at least opened up that discussion.”

This seemed to enrage Ramsay further. “...Are you *fucking* serious?! Cuffe was in no mood to *discuss* anything! He urged the Minister to *do something about* the Muggle-borns – we *all* know what the hell that’s *fucking* code for!”

“Gordon, that boy’s the nephew of an old student of mine,” Slughorn tried to sooth him. “Barnabas has never shown any prejudice against Muggle-borns...I doubt *very* highly that the boy meant that...”

“That so-called ‘*boy*’ you’re talking about is 28 years old and a *fucking adult!*” roared Ramsay. “He knew *exactly* what the hell he was saying – and if he somehow *didn’t*, then his brain clearly has gone past its expiration date, and I’ll dig the remains out of his skull with a *spoon* before letting him pick up a quill again!”

“Gordon, please mind your volume,” Dumbledore said patiently, though judging by the coldness of his tone, he seemed to agree with Ramsay’s sentiment.

“Gordon, I *know* why you’re upset,” Bagnold said sympathetically. “This article was bound to upset you, given your ancestry – after all, you yourself were never able to reach your fullest potential, thanks to your NEWT scores – ”

“DON’T – YOU – *DARE!*”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all flinched back – Ramsay’s voice had suddenly gone louder and more furious than they’d ever heard it before.

“DON’T YOU FUCKING *DARE* CLAIM I’M ANGRY JUST BECAUSE MY PRECIOUS *FEELINGS* GOT HURT! HAVE YOU FUCKING LOST YOUR MEMORY OF THE LAST TWENTY YEARS – HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN THAT WE LOST *HUNDREDS* OF GOOD, INNOCENT PEOPLE TO YOU-KNOW-WHO THE LAST TIME HE CAME TO POWER, ALL BECAUSE PEOPLE RALLIED IN THE THOUSANDS TO FIGHT FOR HIM?!”

“I most certainly have *not*,” Bagnold shot back, her tone ringing with pain and righteous fury, “given that I was leader of the *entire Wizarding World* during those events and witnessed more than my fair share of friends and family die at the hands of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named! I will *never* forget that, however much I may wish to!”

“Yet you have the *gall* to not give a shit when some condescending, dick-faced, shit-for-brains *asshat* tries to drum up support for new Death Eaters *in the most popular paper in the Wizarding World!*”

“*Enough*,” said Dumbledore sharply.

There was a painful silence.

“Millicent, Horace...I’m afraid we’ll have to reschedule this meeting to later this evening. I’m afraid I’ve suddenly come down with an illness and must return to my office forthwith.”

From his low, harsh tone of voice, however, it was very clear that Dumbledore’s illness had an external source.

There was a shuffle; barely five seconds later, Dumbledore had opened the door. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stumbled back, not having been fast enough to avoid getting caught.

Dumbledore peered down at Harry through his half-moon spectacles, his light blue eyes misty and hard to read. Harry held his ground, even though his face was flushing.

“...I heard raised voices,” he said lowly. “I wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

Dumbledore’s eyes moved over Harry’s face, clearly scanning his expression and eyes for any signs of dishonesty. Then the Headmaster gave him the very slightest and softest of smiles.

“...Very true to you, Harry.”

With this, he swept down the hall. When Harry glanced over his shoulder to watch Dumbledore go, he noticed for the first time how many other students had stopped in the halls behind him, Ron, and Hermione, also clearly wanting to listen in.

Harry then looked through the open door at the three judges left behind in the breakroom, all of whom appeared stunned by the size of their audience. Bagnold looked like a deer in the headlights; Slughorn’s mouth was left slightly open. Ramsay stared at Harry for a moment, his blue eyes running over his face – then he recovered, getting to his feet and strolling quickly into the hall as well.

“All of you move along,” he told the students in the hall under his breath. “The class bell won’t wait up for you lot – so take off.”

Round 5: Prep-Time

With how things were going, it was unsurprising that everyone at school was looking forward to the next round of MagicChef Junior even more than usual. It seemed like the contest and the promise of Quidditch matches returning in March were the only enduring glints of sunshine that kept the students going.

The morning of Valentine's Day Harry, Ron, and Hermione came down to breakfast as usual, trying to ignore the cutesy, overly romantic air of the place as girls and boys greeted each other with magically sprouting flowers and singing cards.

"Is it just me, or does it get more and more schmaltzy every year?" Ron joked.

"It's not just you," said Harry.

He glanced over at Ginny, who was already sitting at the Gryffindor table and had already gotten divebombed with a whole stack of badly singing Valentine's Day cards by a flock of owls. When she couldn't seem to silence them, she angrily set them on fire with her wand. Harry couldn't help but smile fondly.

"Oh!" Ron said abruptly. "I almost forgot!"

He dashed over to the Ravenclaw table. Harry and Hermione, looking at each other in confusion, followed him.

"Astoria!" said Ron as he came to a halt in front of her and Arjuna. "Happy birthday."

Astoria looked surprised, but smiled anyway. "...Thanks, Ron."

"It's your birthday today?" asked Hermione.

"Unfortunately," Astoria said sardonically.

Arjuna lightly punched Astoria's shoulder.

"Stori's always hated having her birthday on Valentine's Day," she said lightly, her lips curled up in a fondly wry smile. "I told her it suits her, but she doesn't believe me."

"Sorry if I don't quite see myself in a day that somehow makes red roses boring," Astoria replied coolly.

Ron laughed. "Well, maybe after the round is over, we can bake you a little cake, eh?"

"Only if I make it to the next round," Astoria said with a wry smirk. "If I don't, I'll have to make my own cake."

"Suit yourself. Well...see you this afternoon!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione waved goodbye to Arjuna and Astoria and headed back toward the Gryffindor table. As they made to sit down, however, Ramsay strode up to them.

"Good morning, Ron."

Ron looked up at Ramsay, startled. "Oh – morning, Professor."

"We'll be meeting a little earlier than usual today," Ramsay told him. "After breakfast, come straight down to my classroom, and we'll go over the next challenge."

"...Okay," said Ron, sounding a little surprised and confused but smiling all the same.

Ramsay gave Ron a small smile in return. His blue eyes flickered over to Harry and Hermione as well.

"...Look..." he said slowly, "about what happened the other day...I'm sorry you had to overhear that."

“Why?” said Hermione, frowning deeply. “You didn’t say anything bad...it was Minister Bagnold and Mr. Slughorn who were in the wrong – ”

Ramsay shook his head politely. “Regardless of how you feel about Millicent and Horace – and I assure you, they’re decent enough people, even if they might lack self-awareness – ”

“From what I heard, it sounded like they lack a few other things, too,” Ron muttered sourly. “A moral compass...brain size...”

Ramsay placed a hand on Ron’s shoulder, his expression quite grave.

“Careful, Ron – I know it’s easy to label Horace and Millicent as purely bad people, after hearing something like that...but please do not judge someone based solely on one conversation. Are Millicent and Horace prejudiced? Yes. Were they wrong? Definitely. Are they evil? No. They may not help the situation, as they can be enablers to *actual* evil...but there is a difference between someone who makes faulty judgments about an entire group of people and someone who deems himself superior to them. Millicent thinks that we must treat everyone’s opinion with value, even if that person is a radical blood purist. Horace thinks that coming from a powerful magical family improves the likelihood of your success, even if some of his best students contradict this. They do not, however, consider themselves or other Purebloods superior to Muggle-borns...and both of them have been friends to me. *That* is why I was so angry with them – because I know they can be better than how they acted yesterday.”

Harry, Hermione, and Ron exchanged glances, not wholly convinced.

“And besides,” Ramsay continued solemnly, as he withdrew his hand, “I would’ve preferred that you hadn’t heard any of the argument at all...I’m your teacher, and I’m supposed to set a good example...”

“I reckon you did,” Harry said plainly, his eyebrows raised.

Ramsay turned to Harry, staring at him for a moment. There was something misty in his eyes, something thoughtful – yet his gaze almost seemed to go right through Harry, seeing something no one else could see.

Then he smiled a little more fully, his blue eyes becoming oddly soft.

“...Thank you, Harry.”

He then turned to Ron. “See you downstairs.”

“Kay!” Ron called after him as Ramsay walked out of the Hall.

Harry and Hermione bid Ron goodbye after breakfast, heading upstairs to Defense Against the Dark Arts with Snape while Ron headed downstairs toward the dungeons.

When Ron arrived, the other contestants were already there. Astoria was the only one of the three standing; she was leaning against the wall casually, her arms folded behind her back to serve as a cushion between her back and the cold stone. Hannah sat in a chair behind a desk, slouching slightly and her arms resting in her lap. Bridget was sitting idly on top of the desk in front of Hannah, one leg crossed over the other and looking as effortlessly confident as always.

“Hey, Bridget,” greeted Ron, heading over to her at once.

Bridget looked up. At the sight of him, she smiled.

“Hi, Ron.”

Ron’s blue eyes ran over her face, scanning it carefully. She didn’t *look* upset – she looked the same as ever, really...yet Ron couldn’t help but feel like she *shouldn’t* look the same as ever, given what had happened and how much she’d avoided him. Had she recovered on her own? Possibly...

Bridget clearly noticed the concern painted on Ron’s face, and her smile faltered slightly.

“Ron, I’m fine,” she reassured him, her white teeth blazing in a confident smirk as she waved her hand dismissively. “Pansy and her friends are jerks – why would I care about what they think?”

Ron almost believed her – until he noticed the strange, almost cruel glint in the corner of her black eyes.

“Bridget – ”

He was interrupted, however, by the judges’ arrival.

Dumbledore, Ramsay, Bagnold, and Slughorn entered the room one by one. When they stood side by side, Dumbledore stood firmly between Ramsay and Bagnold and Slughorn like a physical barrier, and all four of them kept their focus exclusively on the students, rather than looking at each other. It was clear they’d jointly decided to act like the argument the other day had not happened, even if the tension between them had not fully cleared.

“Good morning, chefs,” said Dumbledore. “Today you shall face your most grueling challenge yet. This round, however...will take place in a brand new location.”

Ron felt something yank at his pant leg. He looked down and was faced with the tennis-ball-like green eyes of Dobby the house elf.

“Take Dobby’s hand, Master Weasley!” he said brightly. “Dobby will take Master Weasley to his work station.”

Blinking in surprise, Ron nonetheless gave a nod and took hold of the elf’s outstretched, long-fingered hand.

Crack.

In an instant, they had left Ramsay’s classroom and were suddenly standing in a more than familiar space, which was stuffed to brim with house elves darting across the floor carrying tall stacks of dirty dishes.

“Welcome to the Hogwarts kitchens,” Slughorn said jovially, as he released Koko’s gnarled hand. “I believe you all are quite familiar with this space already, am I right?”

Ron couldn’t help but shoot Slughorn a sour expression – what he’d recently heard from the Slytherin judge made it hard not to hear his pleasantry as condescension, no matter what Ramsay had said. He then glanced around at the other chefs, who were all holding their respective elves’

hands too and looked just as surprised by their change in environment.

Ramsay stepped forward, his lips curled up in a wry smile.

“In this challenge, we’ll be pulling a fast one on your classmates. *They* think that this round will take place at the Quidditch pitch at 7:00 as usual, but instead it will actually take place at dinnertime – with you four taking the place of the Hogwarts house elves and cooking the dishes.”

Ron went very white. They’d have to cook the entire feast *by themselves* – just the *four* of them? He glanced at the others, who looked similarly intimidated. Bridget looked the bravest of them, but even she looked a little shaken.

“Not to worry,” said Bagnold kindly, “you won’t be without help. Your house elf partners – Dobby, Pilo, Poppy, and Hardy – will be working alongside you as your equals. They will not only be allowed to act as a resource, but they can also jump in to help you more than they have in the past. You can ask them for cooking advice, or to mind your burner while you work on something else, or even to help you cook a particular dish if you’re running behind. With their help, you will be able to prepare every dish that goes out onto the tables upstairs. Each dish you prepare will be placed on a plate of a certain color, to help us keep track of which chef made what. Astoria, your food will go on bronze dishes; Hannah, on diamond; Ron, on gold; and Bridget, on silver.”

She held up each of the plates in turn for them to see – they gleamed in the candlelight overhead, bouncing colorful light onto the ceiling and nearby wall.

“This round will test your endurance, patience, skill, and composure,” said Dumbledore. “There will be no glamour or glory during this round – merely grueling, stressful work that you will somehow have to come out the other end of with a smile on your face. You will be put under *astounding* pressure, to keep up with demand. You will have to prepare dishes quickly...but you’ll also have to prepare them well enough to coax the people sitting around the plates to sample them. It’s the elves’ policy that any dish left untouched after ten minutes is immediately brought back to the kitchen and treated as if it was *sent* back. That means all other dishes are put on hold until that one is fixed. Empty plates are also brought back, and an empty plate must be replaced by a fresh version of the dish as quickly as possible. After the feast...we will select the top two student chefs who will go on to compete in the finale.”

“As your Headmaster will have to be upstairs during the feast,” said Bagnold, “you will be overseen largely by the Hogwarts house elves, who will give us their final report at the end. One of your judges has also volunteered to stay behind and lead you as Head Chef...” She smiled wryly. “...Can you guess who it is?”

The student chefs had a bad feeling they knew exactly who. As a unit, they all very, very slowly trailed their eyes over to Ramsay, who smiled broadly.

“Me,” he said, his eyes twinkling with mischief as he crossed his arms over his broad chest.

Despite how pleasant Ramsay had always been to him, Ron was no less terrified by this revelation. Everyone knew about Ramsay’s relentless, strict attitude in the kitchen and about how loud and brutal he could get if things were not up to his standards...and the idea of having to face Ramsay’s temper head-on was more than a little intimidating.

“You’re here nice and early,” said Ramsay, pushing his rolled-up sleeves a little higher up his arms, “so that the house elves can show you how to make all of the different dishes. Some of these I’m quite sure you already know how to make...but some you probably have not. To make sure we’re all on the same page, we’ll go through all sixteen of them.”

And so the grueling training session began. The elves worked on dishes four at a time, with each student chef going around in a circle observing each one. By the end, the elves had instructed them how to properly prepare all the entrées (roast chicken, steak-and-kidney pie, cottage pie, shepherd’s pie, lamb chops, and Yorkshire pudding) and the sides of roast, mashed, and boiled potatoes, as well as apple pie, chocolate gateau, treacle tart, and hand-churned chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, raspberry, and butterscotch ice cream. It was dizzying and anxiety inducing – Ron was a bit comforted by how most of the things they were making were things he’d seen made at home, but he was also concerned by how *precise* everything was. The elves seemed to have little interest in spontaneity – every dish was regimented and had to be consistent in taste and in quality. It was nothing like how Mrs. Weasley cooked at home or how he’d cooked in this competition – it’d been so fun to cook whatever he wanted however he wanted...but this time he’d have to follow everything right to the letter.

The food that the elves had prepared ended up being a little private feast for the four student chefs and Ramsay. They sat around a small table that the elves had set up in the corner, enjoying their lunch. Ron didn’t think he’d even seen Ramsay looking more jovial than he did enjoying the elves’ delicious food.

“*Excellent* Yorkshire, I must say,” he said, indicating the pie with his fork.

“Yeah,” Ron agreed through a mouthful of pudding. The others nodded too.

Ramsay rested his hand on the side of the table, still holding his fork in a loose grip.

“So how are you all feeling? I know we’ve thrown a lot at you, all at once...”

“Yeah...but I think I can manage,” answered Bridget with a smile.

Once again Ron had the feeling that Bridget shouldn’t be as confident as she was acting. Ramsay seemed to feel the same way.

“It’s not just an issue of *you* managing it,” he said patiently. “You four are all talented chefs – but this round it’ll be all about you coming together as a cohesive team and getting the job done.”

“I’m sure we’ll do just fine!” Hannah offered brightly, even though she still looked a little worried. “I mean, we’ve done team challenges before...”

“Yes, you have,” granted Ramsay, “but I’ll warn you right now – working in a real kitchen is different than cooking for a panel of judges. It’s exhausting, it’s thankless, and it’s very, *very* hard...and that’s just for cooking for adult diners, let alone children.”

Ron’s stomach twitched with nerves. He glanced at Astoria, who also looked a little concerned.

“...Well,” he said with a weak smile, “at least we won’t have an audience watching us while we’re running around like chickens with our heads cut off, eh?”

Hannah giggled; Astoria smiled broadly.

“That is *one* benefit, yes,” Ramsay said with a wry smile.

Round 5: Elimination

The four student chefs began their ordeal at 4:00 PM, just one hour before dinner was to start, when they had to make the first round of dishes. By the time they were done about an hour later, they had to immediately start prepping for the next round that would invariably follow.

It was more than a little draining – Ron felt very fortunate that he was strong and fast enough to carry multiple plates of food to the chef's window at a time and also do it quickly. At one point Ramsay had scolded him (without curse words, miraculously!) for his Yorkshire Pudding being underdone and refused to send it out the way it was; Ron quickly fixed it and sent it back out three minutes later, and Ramsay deemed it satisfactory the second time. Despite that hiccup, though, his dishes weren't turning out too badly. Given that he grew up in a family of nine, Ron was more than used to stress in the kitchen – Mrs. Weasley was always bustling around like crazy whenever she had company around, so all the hustle and bustle felt almost normal.

The others, however, were having some difficulty. Ramsay had had to bark at Astoria and Hannah to speed up a little, as they were putting out fewer dishes than the other two. Astoria had been flexible enough to adapt, but poor Hannah, being much more of a “slow and steady” type, was getting flustered. Two of her dishes were sent back, and at one point she even sent out the completely wrong dish and she had to immediately put down everything else to make the correct one. Fortunately her partner Pilo, who was also the head chef among the Hogwarts house elves, was very helpful in taking her finished dishes to the chef's window for her and he even took a minute to give Hannah some advice.

“Dinnertime is always stressful for the kitchen staff,” Pilo told her kindly, his warm golden eyes crinkled upward as he smiled. “Pilo doesn't think it feels quite as good after all his work, if it isn't hard while it's happening – Miss Abbott thinks so as well, right?”

Hannah gave a weak laugh, choking back some tears.

In response to Hannah's trouble as well as to help herself, Astoria had asked her house elf Poppy to expedite for the four of them, reciting out which orders needed to be done one at a time. Unfortunately once Poppy started doing that, that was when Bridget started going downhill.

“Cottage pie for the Ravenclaw table!” squeaked Poppy.

“I've got it!” said Bridget.

“Bridget,” Astoria said, looking up from her Yorkshire Pudding with a disapproving frown, “you’ve got four plates in front of you right now – let someone else do it – ”

“I said *I’ve got it*,” Bridget cut her off, her voice unusually cool.

She put down her pan of boiled potatoes for a moment, shifting over to the oven so she could take out her three shepherd’s pies and put them down to cool while she started gathering the ingredients for the cottage pie.

Ramsay, who was observing the whole thing from the other side of the chef’s window, frowned deeply.

“Bridget, remember, you’re a *team* – ”

“But I’ve *got it*,” Bridget said stubbornly, dropping off two of the shepherd’s pies in the window. “Gryffindor’s and Slytherin’s shepherd’s pies, order up!”

Ramsay shook his head as he examined both pies and then handed them off to the house elves to take upstairs. Astoria and Hannah exchanged a look; then Hannah, still looking quite pale, put down her unfinished butterscotch ice cream and came to stand just behind Bridget, looking over her shoulder at her dishes.

“Bridget,” she attempted gently, “are you *sure* you don’t want some help?”

“I’m sure,” Bridget answered smoothly. Once again, though, her voice didn’t quite sound right – it wasn’t quite as amiable as it should be, instead being almost curt.

“But – ” Hannah clutched the front of her apron anxiously, and she offered a weak smile. “Bridget, you’ve *got to* be getting tired...I’d be happy to help out! I-I can do the cottage pie, while you finish up your other dishes – ”

“Thanks for the *concern*,” Bridget shot back, her voice becoming a little cooler now as she dashed some dirty dishes over to the sink, ignoring Hardy’s failed attempt to take the dishes for her, “but I’m fine.”

"I'm sure you are, but...I'd *like* to help!" Hannah said earnestly. "I mean, you can't do it *all* by yourself, so – "

Ron, who had only just returned from putting some dishes in the chef's window, came back just in time to see Bridget's black eyes flare and he knew at once that Hannah had said the exact wrong thing.

"Oh, I *can't*, can I?" she retorted. "Can I not do it because *you* can't do it...or because it's *me* that's trying to do it?"

Hannah flinched, visibly taken aback. "What...?"

"Don't equate my talents with yours," Bridget snapped, all traces of her familiar white smile gone. "Which of us have had their dishes come back, hmm? I don't think it was *me*."

"Bridget – "

Hannah sounded hurt, but Bridget cut her off again.

"I've been in my mum's kitchen since I could *walk*, so if anyone knows what the hell she's doing, it's *me* – and until you step up your game and start cooking dishes that *don't* get sent back at a halfway decent pace, I don't want to hear you say a *damn* word about what I can and cannot do! Now get the hell out of my face!"

Hannah's brown eyes flooded with tears, and before she could stop herself, she'd covered her face and darted away into a corner. Ramsay, although he looked quite upset with Bridget, immediately ran to go comfort Hannah.

Ron watched Ramsay go, bewildered. Astoria whirled on Bridget, looking furious.

"Bridget, that was *completely* uncalled for!"

"I told her I didn't want help and she kept bothering me," Bridget said coldly, turning back to her dishes. "At least I finally got her to listen."

“Contrary to popular belief, you can get people to listen to you in ways that do *not* involve insulting them!” Astoria shot back. “You know *full well* how sensitive Hannah’s feelings are right now – you *knew* what you said would upset her!”

“If you’re trying to get me to feel sorry, well, I’m *not*, Astoria,” snarled Bridget, still refusing to turn around. “Maybe *you’re* still in that charmed mode of thinking that we’re all still buddies and it doesn’t matter who wins, but this means far too much to me for me to slack off – and I don’t need you telling me how to feel any more than I need *Hannah* trying to pressure me into accepting help!”

Astoria put both of her hands on her hips, ready to argue further – Ron, however, had heard enough.

“Time-out!”

The youngest Weasley boy strode forward, seizing hold of Bridget’s arm and forcing her to put the pan down on the backburner. She irritably tried to pull out of his grip, but Ron was strong enough that he could yank her to the side where no one else could hear.

“Bridget – what’s going on?” he muttered to her.

“Nothing,” grumbled Bridget impatiently. “I’m just trying to win, that’s all...”

“Don’t give me that,” said Ron, keeping a rein on his temper as best as he could. “You’ve been acting off all day. Is this because of what Pansy said – because of that stupid article?”

Bridget’s black eyes flashed with some more of that cruelty Ron had seen earlier.

“...I don’t...give a *damn* about what Pansy and her crew thinks,” she mumbled icily.

“If that’s true, then why are you refusing our help?” demanded Ron. “We’ve worked together before – Astoria, you, and I were a great team! Dragons, remember?”

“In that scenario, Astoria was assigned team leader – here we’re equals,” Bridget answered, her voice starting lightly cool but then shifting to a harder, harsher tone as it went on, “and I frankly don’t like to be told that I can’t do something!”

“This isn’t about *you* not being able to do something,” Ron said insistently. “*No one* could feed an entire bloody castle on their own!”

“You can make your own dishes,” Bridget said sharply. “They’ll go out on your plates, and they’ll be your own work – but I’m *not* going to share credit in this round with anyone – not Hardy, not Astoria, not Hannah – not even you.”

“Why?”

“Because if I do, then all the credit will go to the person who helped me! Because if I don’t do it all on my own, then any success I achieve will be one I won by standing on the shoulders of others, not by my own merit!”

“I thought you said what Pansy and her friends think doesn’t matter,” Ron challenged her.

“It doesn’t!”

“Then who are you trying to prove yourself to?!”

“*Everyone else!*” Bridget screamed at last, her voice almost aching with how much fury and vengeance was seeping through it. “I *know* I’ll never change Pansy’s mind, or Blaise’s, or Vincent’s, and *I don’t care!* They’re all blood purist pigs! Their opinions don’t matter! But before that article came out, I only had to accidentally overhear them whispering that stuff in the corner of the Slytherin common room – not yelling it at the top of their lungs for everyone in the whole *school* to hear! And they didn’t stop there! I still heard what they said from other people – wondering if maybe Muggle-borns *are* weak, or Purebloods *are* superior – saying that of *course* I did so well in the last round, when I had two *Sacred Twenty-Eight kids* helping me out – and *that’s* making all the little blood purists at this school reach out and share their stupid tabloids and shoot their mouths off even more! Those disgusting, yelping rats suddenly feel brave enough to broadcast what they think to the whole world...when I had actually started to think that even *Slytherin house* would support a Muggle-born champion, as long it was theirs! When I had only just gotten comfortable and thought that I’d *finally* found a place where I belonged, where I wasn’t a freak, or different – ”

Her black eyes were swimming with pain, and it made her lash out with venomous bile.

“I *HATE THEM!* And I’m going to prove them *wrong!* I’m going to prove them wrong before the whole world and turn them back into the pathetic, laughable wretches they were before the War started – the people who even other *Slytherins* gave a berth to, because their beliefs were such utter *bull* that no one ever thought to listen! I want to step on every single one of those Pureblood-supremacist dungbombs on my way to the top and kick them back down into the mud from whence they came!”

A tear had started to form in the corner of Bridget’s eye, but she ignored it.

“And the only way I’m going to do that is to win this contest *on my own!*”

There was a silence. Bridget breathed in and out, struggling to steady her breath.

Ron had never felt so simultaneously sympathetic and frustrated at the same time. He could thoroughly understand Bridget’s position – it had to have felt so awful for her, to have to listen to all that stupid stuff and know that even her own *house* wasn’t fully in her corner anymore...not to mention the thought that she’d felt like she’d *finally* found a place where she could fit in, only to have her hopes dashed. That sentiment of Hogwarts being like a home was familiar, though not because of Ron’s own experience.

“*You and Harry were my first friends, ever, and you – you just don’t **understand** that, do you?*”

Hermione’s words rang out in Ron’s head, accompanied by the memory of Harry’s excitement when Ron first joined him at the Gryffindor table.

Both of his best friends knew that feeling Bridget described. The Dursleys had called Harry a freak because he could do magic. Malfoy had called Hermione a “Mudblood” in the past, and even Ron had made fun of her at the beginning of first year for how much of an obnoxious teacher’s pet she could be. Yet despite all this...Ron knew that Bridget couldn’t possibly win by shutting out everyone else...but even if he said that, he knew it wouldn’t change her mind. If Bridget accepted help, then people would question her victory...and she was too determined to get back at the people who had hurt her that she was now too proud to accept help in getting there.

‘*Self-destructive tendencies,*’ Ron recalled glumly. It seemed Bridget hadn’t been kidding about that...

He exhaled heavily through his nose, his blue eyes trailing over Bridget's face.

"...All right," he said at last, very quietly. "If you don't want help...then I won't force you. I won't give you anything unless you ask for it...and I'll make sure the others back off. Even if I think you're wrong...I really hope that you're right."

Something in Bridget's face twitched – although it remained hard, her eyes lost some of their coldness as Ron turned away and headed back to his station. Ramsay had already returned with Hannah, who was wiping away some of her tears.

"Professor – " Ron started, but Ramsay raised a hand to stop him.

"I heard enough," he said calmly, and he gave Ron a small smile, "and honestly...I think you handled it well enough already."

He then turned to Astoria, Hannah, and the returning Bridget with a more solemn expression.

"Back to work now, all of you – and let's keep the tiffs to a minimum, please."

After that, a rhythm was established. While Poppy recited orders, Bridget continued doing five plates each, all of them perfect, by herself; Astoria worked on three dishes at a time with Hardy and Pilo's help, almost as perfect as Bridget's; and Hannah and Ron tag-teamed, each of them taking turns watching each other's dishes and taking them to the window. The pace was frenetic enough that Hannah still seemed a bit overwhelmed, but Ron was quick to jump in and help whenever she had to stop to catch her breath.

"Dobby, can you take Hannah's ice cream up?" he asked.

As Dobby brightly popped over and carried the diamond serving bowl full of strawberry ice cream to the window, Ron looped an arm around Hannah's shoulders, giving her a light squeeze.

"I know – it's bloody mad," he said lightheartedly. "Think of it this way, though – we'll eat ourselves silly when this is all done, right?"

Hannah gave a soft giggle and nodded. Astoria smiled slightly at the two of them.

“Well, there should be a birthday cake in my future,” she said lightly, “so there’s always that – how about a triple layer carrot cake?”

“Sounds delicious,” said Hannah, her brown eyes twinkling warmly.

Ron glanced at Bridget over his shoulder. “...Maybe the two of us can add some vanilla ice cream to that too, eh, Bridget? Make an a-la-mode?”

Bridget didn’t turn around, but judging by her back, she seemed almost surprised Ron had suggested such a thing – as if she was surprised that he could still talk so nicely to her after how badly she’d acted.

“...Let’s focus on finishing this round first,” she said very quietly, though this time there was none of the coldness she’d shown before.

Ron took her lack of an answer in stride. He’d seen such behavior in Daphne before and knew that it was an issue of discomfort and pride that made Bridget not play along, not lack of caring.

“Right – we’ll knock the socks off this feast, and *then* we’ll make the carrot cake a-la-mode. Maybe we’ll use the ice cream as the icing – we’ll alternate between butterscotch and vanilla, all the way up – and we’ll make it fifteen layers high and cover the whole thing with edible pearls – and only the *four* of us will be allowed to eat it!”

Bridget didn’t answer, but her posture relaxed slightly.

When the tiring, grueling feast was over, the house elves took all of the dirty dishes to the sink, allowing the students to finally catch their breath.

“Well done, you four,” said Ramsay. “That was definitely hard, but you all did amazingly well with the challenge put before you. We only had three dishes come back all night – there’s no way I could’ve done so well, the first time *I* started working in a kitchen. Before we head upstairs, I’ll need to consult the house elves and they’ll give me their conclusions about which chefs they think

should advance. Pilo will then covertly pop up to the other judges and fetch me their opinions, and we'll head upstairs and surprise everyone with the results."

The student chefs took a thirty-minute break, in which they devoured a whole roast chicken and gulped down the three canisters of pumpkin juice that the elves had made especially for their dinner. Then, following Ramsay, they started back upstairs.

"We had a few *Daily Prophet* reporters visit the Great Hall for dinner," Ramsay explained as they trudged up to the main level together, "supposedly doing a study on the house elves and their food that they could then use in an article they're writing. Of course what your classmates *don't* know is that that article is about *you* and what everyone thought of your food."

On Ramsay's direction, the student chefs waited outside the Great Hall until he gave them the signal. Within a minute of Ramsay entering, they could hear him address everyone in the Hall from the other side of the door.

"Good evening, everyone! Enjoying the feast?"

Bridget glanced at Hannah out the corner of her eye. She looked like she wanted to say something, but she didn't quite have the heart to – she looked much too guilty, so she tried to obscure her feelings by turning away. Hannah, noticing the difficulty Bridget was having, showed her some pity and spoke first.

"Bridget," she said gently, "I just want to say...that I'm sorry I pushed you...and I hope you know that I think you're brilliant. We all do," she indicated Ron and Astoria as well. Ron nodded.

"Whatever happens, it won't be because of blood," Astoria said firmly. "The house elves certainly don't care about that...and I truly believe that the judges don't either."

Hannah nodded. "Me either – I mean, if they did, then Daphne and Millicent would've been in the top four, not you and me."

"Right," said Ron. "And honestly...if I had to pick anyone to go half-mad trying to cook a feast fit for an entire castle with...I'd pick you guys all over again, no question."

Bridget didn't smile, but her black eyes glittered, and for the first time that night, she actually

looked like she had just a shred of her old self back.

The student body gave a sudden, loud gasp of surprise from inside the Hall. They then all started muttering amongst themselves in confusion.

“...Before we reveal the results,” Ramsay proclaimed from inside the Hall, “let’s meet the chefs who made all of the wonderful dishes you enjoyed tonight!”

Noting their cue, Hannah, Astoria, Bridget, and Ron came into the hall one by one, silently forming a line in front of Ramsay. Everyone in the Hall gasped – then little by little, they all started to applaud, scream, and cheer, until the entire student body was heralding their student chefs. Despite the praise, Ron noticed out the corner of his eye that one tiny section of the Slytherin table was not cheering – Pansy and her crew had gone very white and stock-still, like they had all suddenly been put under a full Body Bind.

‘Just realized that most of what they ate tonight was cooked by a Muggle-born,’ Ron thought in satisfaction. He turned to Bridget, who was smirking coldly in their direction.

“Weasley is a gem within!”

He’s true and loyal to his kin!

Weasley will make sure we win!

Weasley is our king!

Ron turned to the Gryffindor table, beaming as his eyes trailed over the singing faces and the banners his classmates had no doubt intended to use in the stadium and were now waving in the air. One of the largest banners was held up by Lavender, who looked too breathlessly thrilled to sing but no less enthusiastic. But Ron’s gaze slid right past Lavender and landed on Harry and Hermione, who had been sitting with Ginny and Neville and were clapping. Harry was cheering louder than anyone; Hermione looked close to tears, her face shining with pride around her big, bushy hair.

Dumbledore rose from his chair in the back of the Hall, looking at his students over his half-moon spectacles.

“The judges have already deliberated,” he said with a smile, as the applause died down. “We shall base our decision largely on the judgment of the Hogwarts house elves, who observed our student chefs while they cooked us this marvelous feast. Their general consensus was that all of our

competitors were very talented cooks...but not everyone had what was needed to be a successful chef. For one needs more than just talent, to be successful in the field – one also needs endurance, patience, and composure – and one chef, more than any other, showed these traits this evening. That chef is...Ron Weasley.”

Ron felt his heart stop. In an instant he felt like he suddenly couldn't hear anything – then the extreme noise from the Gryffindor table consumed his eardrums, beating them within an inch of their life with roars and screams and song.

“Weasley can save anything!

He never leaves a single ring!

That's why Gryffindors all sing

Weasley is our king! ”

Ron looked around at the Gryffindor table, the judges, and finally his fellow chefs. All three of them were applauding – Hannah and Astoria were beaming from ear to ear, and even Bridget was smiling slightly, though close-mouthed and without the usual gleam of her white teeth. Slowly Ron put two-and-two together and realized why –

If he'd been the only chef to do everything needed in the round...then he was *going on*. He was in the top two! *He would compete in the finale!*

Suddenly flushing bright red from his head to his toes, Ron felt his knees buckle and he collapsed to the ground. He clutched his hair for a minute, overwhelmed by the result and trying to fathom it – then he threw both fists in the air and tossed his head back, letting out a holler of victory.

“YES! YES!”

The Gryffindors all roared louder, singing the whole of *Weasley is Our King* one more time before Dumbledore calmly and silently signaled for quiet.

“Well done, Ron,” the Headmaster said kindly. “You will go on to compete in the finale. Regrettably...there can be only one other who will go there with you.”

Everyone turned to face Hannah, Astoria, and Bridget. All three girls had straightened up, readying

themselves for the inevitably upsetting result. Hannah had started shaking and she bit her lip anxiously. Astoria and Bridget stayed stone-faced, though Astoria was noticeably pale and Bridget had clenched both of her fists at her sides.

“As stated, all of you are immensely talented young chefs,” said Ramsay, his arms crossed over his chest. “But both the house elves and I could only see one logical choice to go on. That chef is...”

The Hall held its collective breath. Ron watched the other three nervously – Hannah, Astoria, and Bridget stayed perfectly still, as if subconsciously hoping that if they stayed very quiet, they’d hear their name being called.

“...Astoria Greengrass.”

Astoria exhaled heavily, covering her face with both hands in an attempt to keep her composure as the Ravenclaw table burst into cheers and whoops. Hannah also covered her face with both hands, breaking down in tears. Bridget was the only one of the three who did not hide – instead she merely closed her eyes and stiffened her back as if she was a child trying not to cry out in pain at getting a shot, no matter how much it hurt.

Ron got to his feet, ready to hug all three of them, but before he could, Ramsay spoke up again.

“Congratulations, Astoria. You and Ron will have an extra week of preparation before the finale, which will be hosted in our usual location, the Quidditch Pitch, on February 28.”

He then turned to Bridget and Hannah. He brought a comforting hand on the second’s shoulder, squeezing it gently.

“Bridget, Hannah,” he said gently, “you both are *astonishingly* good chefs – easily two of the most talented, brightest witches I have met in my entire career. I know your time in the contest ends today...but because of the unbelievable talent you have shown in this competition, I would like to offer both of you full scholarships to Leiths School of Food and Wine, one of the best Muggle culinary schools in Britain!”

Everyone gave shocked outbursts, none more so than the student chefs. Hannah’s brown eyes went very, very wide.

“Really?!” she asked over and over, her voice wheezy with disbelief. *“Really?!”*

Ramsay nodded, and Hannah burst into fresh sobs, her entire body quaking as she tried desperately to hold in her screams of excitement. Bridget was overwhelmed too, even though she made no sound – her black eyes were filling up with tears, but she forcibly kept her face as stony as she could as she turned away from the crowd.

Ron and Astoria exchanged smiles as everyone in the Great Hall applauded. Even though they’d won that round and they’d go on to the finale...at least in this short moment, it felt like they’d all won.

Terence Goodfellow

That night the Gryffindors threw a big party in the commonroom to celebrate Ron's success. Ron had arrived a little late, as he'd promised Astoria a birthday cake, but fortunately Dobby had brought lots of food and butterbeer up from the kitchens and there was plenty left by the time he arrived. Everyone sang and danced and talked throughout the night, until Professor McGonagall finally came into the commonroom, dressed in a robe and slippers, to order them all to go to bed.

The day after the round, Harry, Ron, and Hermione came down to breakfast to find a lot of the students chattering and laughing amongst themselves. At the sight of them, Ginny immediately popped up from the Ravenclaw table (where she'd been talking to Luna) and skipped over to meet them.

"What's going on?" Harry asked her.

"The *Prophet* published their article about the last round," said Ginny, grinning broadly. "Look!"

She handed him her copy of the *Daily Prophet*, indicating an article on the inside. Ron and Hermione peeked over Harry's shoulder so they could read it too.

MAGICCHEFS IMPRESS ALL IN THE HOGWARTS KITCHENS

At Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, four students took the place of the Hogwarts house elves for an evening and surprised their classmates with a delicious feast as part of the MagicChef Junior competition.

For all those who have not been religiously following the contest like your humble reporter has, Gordon Ramsay – well-respected if not somewhat crass head chef of Hell's Kitchen, who has recently taken on the position of Potions professor – has been hosting a contest this year that's tested the next generation of magical cooks, with the goal of finding the best up-and-coming young chef in the Wizarding World. The contest winner shall receive 200 points for their house, 5000 Galleons prize money, an exclusive reservation for their family at Hell's Kitchen, and the title of the very first MagicChef Junior. Joining Ramsay on the contest's panel of judges are Horace Slughorn, well-esteemed Potioneer who previously taught at Hogwarts (a miracle he survived that ordeal); Millicent Bagnold, Minister of Magic during the First Wizarding War (who, quite frankly, your humble reporter would love to interview – send an owl back sometime, won't you, Millie?); and Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts headmaster, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, Chief Warlock of the Wizangamot, and the single best candy

connoisseur one could hope to find.

In previous rounds, the student chefs have been challenged to make perfect pancakes, hand-raised meat pies, specific types of pizza, and beautiful croqembouche towers in only a few hours. This week, however, they worked as chefs in the Hogwarts kitchens and cooked an entire feast by themselves, with their work being put on different colored plates (gold, diamond, bronze, and silver) to signify who had made each dish...not that their classmates knew that! By the judges' design, the students in the Great Hall thought that the Hogwarts house elves had made the feast, as always – and your humble reporter got the scoop on what the student body thought of their classmates' work.

Representing Gryffindor house was Ronald “Ron” Weasley, youngest son of Ministry of Magic employee Arthur Weasley and Keeper on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. But don't let his “jock” persona fool you – most of his classmates had nothing but nice things to say about Ron.

“He's brilliant,” said Lavender Brown, who, like Ron, is in sixth year. “He always gets the better of whatever challenge the judges throw at him [in the MagicChef contest]! And he's really funny too – he always makes everyone laugh!”

Ron's gold-plated entrees and desserts made up about one-fourth of the feast's dishes. Overall the students enjoyed Ron's work, though a few noticed a shift in quality.

“The cottage pie over there [on the silver plate] is a little firmer,” commented Ravenclaw seventh year Cho Chang, who had previously competed in MagicChef Junior.

This reporter took the opportunity to ask Ron's friends, Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, about the food they were eating, and they both said that they enjoyed it. Your humble reporter also noticed, to his immense satisfaction, that they kept naively sampling from the gold plates, which unbeknownst to them were the ones their best friend had made.

Ron looked up at Harry and Hermione, and to their surprise, he was actually blinking back tears. Harry brought an arm around Ron and squeezed his shoulder tightly before returning to the article.

Representing Hufflepuff house was Hannah Abbott, daughter of well-respected Apparition instructor Ophelia Abbott and sixth year Hufflepuff prefect. Hannah is best known at school for her warm personality, which has earned her many friends and admirers.

“She’s a perfectly marvelous chef,” said fellow Hufflepuff prefect Ernie Macmillan. “Best lemon meringue I’ve ever tasted!”

According to Hannah’s best friend, Susan Bones, Hannah is chasing more than just glory in this competition.

“Hannah has always dreamed of opening her own restaurant,” said Bones. “She hopes to go to culinary school after she graduates Hogwarts, and getting Ramsay’s seal of approval on her cooking would definitely help.”

Although Hannah’s dishes were received very well, your humble reporter noted that she put out significantly less than her competitors; percentage-wise, Hannah’s diamond-plated entrees only made up about 10% of the plates at the four house tables. Still, one can make the case for quality over quantity, and this reporter certainly can – after sampling Hannah’s steak-and-kidney pie and being reminded of the sort his dear old mum used to make, he can testify that this young woman has talent!

Representing Ravenclaw house was Astoria Greengrass, fourth year Ravenclaw and younger daughter of the esteemed Greengrass family. The student body’s opinion of Astoria was favorable, but perhaps impersonal. Unlike her fellow competitors, Astoria is generally seen as quiet and unassuming, not being the sort to chase the spotlight. This doesn’t mean, however, that her classmates didn’t have nice things to say.

“She’s got real talent,” said Eddie Carmichael, Ravenclaw seventh year. “Not that the others don’t too, but she really puts in the work. At the beginning a lot of students didn’t think she’d get this far, but she really proved those people wrong...that’s pretty cool.”

Astoria’s bronze plates were universally praised, even though she made only about 20% of the dishes displayed at the tables. Amusingly Astoria’s best friend Arjuna Belaji, who also competed in MagicChef Junior, was the only student who suspected that these dishes were not made by the Hogwarts house elves.

“The way this is baked,” Belaji explained quietly so that her classmates couldn’t overhear, “tells me that the person who made it did it the Muggle way, using a casserole pan and putting it in the oven rather than just cooking it with a Fire-Making Spell. There are only two people I know who cook meat pies that way, and they’re not house elves.”

Finally, representing Slytherin house was Bridget Jaheem, fourth year Slytherin and only child of Charlotte Jaheem, a Muggle who owns a charming London café called Lottie’s. (As a side, your

modest reporter encourages you to try their Friday breakfast special – create your own omelet for only three pounds! Bloody good deal, right there.) The students’ opinions of Bridget were overall pretty positive.

“She’s quite nice, for a Slytherin,” said Hector Summerby, Hufflepuff seventh year and Hogwarts Head Boy. “And it’s amazing she’s gotten as far as she has, being a Muggle-born and all.”

When pressed, Summerby acknowledged that his opinion had been shaped somewhat by the editorial submitted to the Daily Prophet by tabloid writer Uric Cuffe, who suggested that Muggle-borns were genetically less magical than so-called Purebloods.

“So-called Purebloods,” Hermione repeated with a satisfied smirk. *“Because of course many blood purists erase or ignore anyone on their family trees that don’t support their bogus theories.”*

Even though it was difficult to find anyone who explicitly called Bridget their friend, most of the students agreed she had a lot of talent.

“She’s very good,” said one Slytherin student who asked to remain anonymous. “Lately there’s been talk about her ancestry thanks to that rubbish Uric Cuffe wrote, but it’s all ridiculous – she’s easily the most talented cook in the contest right now.”

From what your humble reporter saw, this conclusion is more than fair. Bridget easily outstripped her competitors, with her silver plates making up almost half of the feast’s dishes, and all of the reviews from her Slytherin classmates were glowing. When asked about the steak-and-kidney pie Bridget had made, sixth year Pansy Parkinson claimed that it was even better than last year’s pie, and she partook in four slices of it.

When Harry read this, he burst out laughing. Hermione quickly covered her mouth with both hands to stifle her laughter too; Ron gained a look of vicious pride on his face.

“Damn straight it was better than last year’s, you overgrown pug!” he said smugly.

In the end, Ron and Astoria were chosen to advance to the competition’s finale, largely due to their performance in the kitchen, which alas the spectators were not privy to see. Fortunately for this reporter (who was frankly heartbroken by the decision), Hannah and Bridget did not leave empty-handed; thanks to Ramsay’s generosity, they both received full scholarships to one of the best culinary schools in Great Britain.

The grand finale of MagicChef Junior will be hosted at Hogwarts on February 28 and will be covered by senior Daily Prophet correspondent Azora Blane – trust your humble reporter when he says, dear readers, that he cannot be more jealous. Take lots of pictures, Azora dear! We shall all be waiting on tenterhooks for your report.

The article, however short, left Harry feeling oddly chipper. The *Daily Prophet* had almost always been either the bearer of bad news or a thorn in Harry's side, but for the first time in his memory, Harry actually liked what he'd read.

"Who wrote that?" Ron asked curiously.

Hermione pointed out the biography squeezed into the corner. "'Terence Goodfellow, 23 years, Hogwarts alumnus of house Slytherin, is the winner of six Witch Weekly writing awards and the Daily Prophet's newest junior correspondent.'"

"You remember Terence Higgs, right, Ron?" asked Harry. "He was the Seeker before Malfoy."

A murky image of a tall boy with squinty eyes and dressed in a Slytherin Quidditch uniform swam over Ron's mind. "Oh yeah...he was the one you beat by catching the Snitch in your mouth!"

"I didn't even recognize him at first," admitted Harry. "He's dyed his hair blond, and he had this snake tattoo that kept slithering up and down his arm..."

"He and Bill would get along swimmingly, judging by his fashion sense," said Ginny with a grin. "And if he married a Goodfellow, then he's probably a cool bloke."

"The Goodfellows own the business that creates Dungbombs," Ron explained as a side to Harry and Hermione, who looked confused. "Fred and George work with them a lot."

Hermione smiled. "Well, he seemed pretty nice...when he came over to the Gryffindor table, he stopped to congratulate Harry for becoming Quidditch captain."

"Really?" said Ron incredulously.

“Yeah – said that he wasn’t too surprised that it happened,” added Harry with an amused grin, “since I’d *‘discovered a brand new way to catch the Snitch in my very first year.’*”

Ginny and Ron both laughed.

“Well, I hope the *Prophet* keeps him,” Ron said brightly.

“Me too,” agreed Harry. “They could use someone with a brain – and a sense of a humor, too...”

Goodfellow’s article was circulated amongst the students of Hogwarts over the next few days just as Cuffe’s editorial had been, but unlike the editorial, it felt to Harry like the discussion brightened up the whole castle. Everyone was generally more cheerful and friendly. Even Ernie Macmillan, who Hannah had been pointedly ignoring for about a week, formally apologized to Bridget for putting her down in his support of Hannah, and Bridget graciously accepted his apology. Pansy and her crew had also been noticeably sour all week – Pansy claimed that Goodfellow had completely mischaracterized what she’d said in order to make a good story, but Harry couldn’t help but feel after how she’d lied so blatantly to Rita Skeeter about Hermione two years ago, this was more than just desserts.

On Monday the Gryffindor Quidditch team met for their first spring practice, so that they could prepare before their match against Hufflepuff in March. Both Harry and Ron were really looked forward to it.

“It feels weird to actually be *flying* in the pitch again, and not cooking,” Ron admitted when Harry flew over toward the goal posts where Ron had positioned himself.

Harry nodded sympathetically. “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed, as he swung his broom around to whack the Quaffle Demelza Robins had thrown in his direction out of the way.

Ginny caught the Quaffle. Just as she was about to throw it again, however, something caught her eye down in the stands, and she stopped.

“Harry!” she called over, indicating the stands with a nod of her head.

Harry looked down. A familiar figure with intricately braided hair and a green and silver scarf wrapped around her neck had appeared in the stands, walking down the row just below where Hermione was sitting.

Ron waved broadly at her. “Hey! Bridget!”

Bridget looked up; although she didn’t show her usual bright white teeth, she smiled up at Ron and waved in return.

“Is it okay if I watch, Potter?” she called up at Harry, quirking an eyebrow.

The other members of the Gryffindor team – Dean, Demelza, Jimmy Peakes, and Ritchie Coote – looked concerned; Ginny glanced at Harry, who merely shrugged offhandedly.

“As long as you’re not reporting back to the Slytherins!” he called back coolly.

Bridget gave a single, sardonic laugh as she sat down, crossing her legs. “Ha! Talk to that blood purist scum Urquhart? As if!”

With a wry smile, Harry turned back to his team. “Back to it, then!”

Practice continued as usual. Hermione tried to focus on Ron blocking Ginny and Dean’s attempted goals, but her attention kept getting drawn to Bridget sitting in front of her.

Her mouth contorted in a slight frown. What was she *doing* there? She said she wasn’t helping the Slytherin team, and Hermione thought that was probably true...so...

After about the third time Hermione had glanced down at Bridget, the Slytherin spoke.

“Something you’d like to *say* to me, Granger?” she asked without turning around.

Hermione flushed. Then, gaining a faintly huffy expression, she crossed her arms.

“What are you doing here?”

Bridget shrugged. “I thought I’d come show Ron some support, that’s all.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed slightly. “*Support?*”

Bridget slowly turned around to look at Hermione, her black eyes glittering mischievously.

“...You think Ron and I have something going on behind your back, don’t you?”

Hermione flushed more darkly. Bridget burst out laughing.

“What – what’s so *funny!*?” Hermione snapped at her crossly.

Bridget slowed her laughter, but she looked no less amused.

“...Granger, I like *girls*. Always have. Didn’t think I’d have to spell that out for you to figure out I’m not chasing Ron, but I guess I do! Bloody hell...”

Hermione was stunned into silence; then she looked down, unable to fight her darkening blush.

“...Oh.”

Bridget smirked. “You and Ron are two of a kind, you know that? You’re both perfect morons when it comes to how you act around each other.”

Hermione looked away uncomfortably. “You don’t understand.”

“I think I do,” said Bridget. “At least a little – I’ve had crushes on friends before. Though of course *they* never knew it...and we had to go our separate ways, for different reasons. But I do know how hard it is...feeling the need to both shout your feelings from the rooftop and to bury them so deep that no one will ever find them.”

Hermione looked up at Bridget; her smile was a little gentler now. It made Hermione exhale quietly through her nose, letting her shoulders fall lax at her sides.

“Look,” she said at last. “I’m sorry that I was suspicious...but regardless of any...more *romantic* feelings I might feel for Ron...our friendship will always come first. He and Harry were my first friends – Hogwarts or otherwise – and they mean the *world* to me. I would *never* want to hurt Ron, and I’d never want anyone else to hurt him either...because as far as I’m concerned, he deserves nothing less than what he gave me – happiness...laughter...loyalty – and I’ll *always* protect him, no matter what...because I know he’ll always do the same for me.”

Bridget considered Hermione for a moment. Then her mouth spread into her distinctive, charming white smile.

“...I can see why Ron is smitten with you, Granger. You’re truly a brilliant woman.”

She put out a hand to her. “Truce?”

After a moment, Hermione beamed and extended her own hand to shake Bridget’s.

“Truce.”

Last Time

The week before the MagicChef finale was a little surreal to Harry. On the one hand, students were still rather frequently stopping Ron in the hallways to wish him luck in the contest; on the other, Ron hadn't had to study up at every opportunity. He, Harry, and Hermione had even been able to hang out together by the lake or in the commonroom, chatting and catching up on homework like they used to. It felt really good to escape the thunderstorms outside by cozying up in front of the fire in the Gryffindor commonroom.

On Monday morning Harry, Ron, and Hermione headed down to the Great Hall and were startled to see an argument brewing at the Slytherin table. Ginny and Luna had left their respective tables and were standing just behind a seated Bridget, facing Pansy, who was standing on the other side of the table with Zabini, Tracey, Daphne, Crabbe, and Goyle. Ginny had her wand out and was pointing it angrily at Pansy – Daphne looked like she was trying to deescalate the situation, her brown eyes darting up at the teacher's table and back.

"Oh no," murmured Hermione.

The three strode over just in time to hear the tail end of the argument.

"Come on, Bridget," Ginny said coolly, "come sit with us – listen to *those* sorts too long and your brain will start melting out through your ears..."

Bridget gave a slight smirk. Then, flashing a cold look at Pansy, she got up, and followed Ginny and Luna back to the Ravenclaw table, where they had presumably been sitting. It was as they sat down that Harry, Ron, and Hermione joined them.

"Bridget, are you okay?" Ron asked, his blue eyes flashing over at the Slytherin table.

"I'm fine," Bridget said quietly.

"Pansy was talking about the *Stormer*'s newest article," Luna answered coolly. "It claimed that a Muggle-born witch attacked a Pureblood Ministry employee in a fit of rage."

Ron sputtered furiously. "That's – that's *ridiculous*! The *Prophet* would've said something if – "

“That’s the problem,” Luna said a little more quietly, her dreamy light blue eyes oddly solemn. “The *Stormer* claims the *Daily Prophet* is deliberately keeping it quiet – and the *Prophet* has deliberately ignored or buried *other* stories before, hasn’t it?”

Hermione and Ron exchanged a wary look, and Harry’s stomach squirmed. Luna had a point – the *Daily Prophet* had a bad track record when it came to being honest. Usually the paper put out good information, but there were times where it had not fact-checked its articles enough or had simply written whatever the Ministry of Magic wanted.

Ginny’s brown eyes narrowed slightly as she leaned in almost protectively toward Bridget.

“Pansy said that it was little surprise that Muggle-borns were more violent, given that they’re descended from Muggles, who are one step up from animals,” she growled, her cheeks rose red with righteous fury. “I was ready to throw a Bat Bogey Hex at the lot of them – show them how violent *I* could be, in response to their crap – ”

“As funny as that would’ve been,” Bridget said, biting back a smile with difficulty, “it’s a good thing Daphne stopped you.”

“She didn’t *stop* me,” argued Ginny.

“She warned you that the teachers might see.”

“So? Clearly didn’t want to get hexed, now did she?”

“*And* she didn’t want you to get in trouble,” Bridget said matter-of-factly. “She just couldn’t say so, being around Pansy and her lot, so she had to help in a roundabout way.”

“It would’ve been more useful if she’d just told Pansy to shut her face,” Ginny said stubbornly.

Harry laughed. Despite herself, Bridget couldn’t stop herself from grinning broadly from ear to ear, her white teeth and black eyes gleaming.

“Sorry, Ginny...but we Slytherins just aren’t that straight-forward.”

Dean Thomas came over at that moment, sliding right past Harry to get to Ginny.

“Cuse me, Harry,” he said politely. He took a seat on the other side of Ginny. “There you are...I was looking for you.”

“What for?” asked Ginny. Her tone was unusually flat and she seemed to not want to look Dean in the eye.

Dean frowned deeply. “You left the commonroom early.”

“I had some stuff to take care of.”

“You could’ve waited for me – I would’ve gone with you – ”

“I didn’t need you to *accompany* me to McGonagall’s office.”

Suddenly feeling immensely uncomfortable, Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione. They both nodded in silent agreement.

“See you later, Ginny,” Ron said quickly, and the three swept away toward the Gryffindor table, leaving Bridget, Luna, Ginny, and Dean alone.

On Wednesday Harry and Hermione went to Apparition lessons. Unfortunately the class cost twelve Galleons each and Mr. Weasley wouldn't be paid until Thursday, so Ron had to sit out until the next one. Harry had tried to pay for Ron, but Ron had brushed him off, putting on his best smile to hide how upset he was, and left Harry and Hermione in the hallway before the class started.

'There's another class next week,' Ron reminded himself. 'It's okay if you miss one -- you can catch up -- '

The thought of the MagicChef prize money rippled through his mind. His stomach squirmed in a sick, uncomfortable sort of way.

'Wouldn't have to skive off on stuff, would you -- having 5000 extra Galleons just lying around...?'

To keep his mind off these negative thoughts, Ron decided to head down to the kitchens so he could practice. On his way down, however, he overheard voices in the hall that made him pause on the stairs.

“Dumbledore’s left *again*? Where the hell is he *disappearing* to, when he should be at school doing his bloody job?”

“Some of us have more on our plates than just *classwork*, Ramsay.”

It was Ramsay and Snape – and, to be expected, they sounded like they were on the edge of a row. Ron peeked around the corner just enough so he could see – Ramsay and Snape, for now, had a good foot between them, with Snape turned away but still speaking over his shoulder.

“Don’t you *start* with me, Snape,” growled Ramsay. “Until you actually *act* like a bloody teacher and *teach* your kids rather than pick on them, you don’t have a leg to stand on, telling me that shite!”

Snape sneered at Ramsay. “Ah yes, *teach* them – and what have *you* taught them as of late, Ramsay? How to sauté and fillet? Or perhaps to bury their heads in the sand – that’s a skill you’ve certainly gotten a lot of use out of – ”

Ramsay took out his wand, but Snape was just as fast. In an instant, he had whirled around and pointed his wand at Ramsay’s chest, just as Ramsay had pointed his wand at Snape’s.

“You know things are getting worse,” Snape said very softly, his black eyes incredibly cold upon Ramsay’s. “You can’t be so *mindless* to think the students don’t know that as well.”

“This is not their War,” Ramsay growled back.

“The *Stormer* has made some people wary of the *Prophet*, being the only one to report what happened to Wilhelm Burke,” Snape hissed. “You know as well as I how much that was the first step, last time.”

“Burke provoked Ida, we all know it.”

“Perhaps – but the only story that was put out was the *Stormer*’s...and even if the *Daily Prophet* puts out their own version later, it will only be seen as them quickly trying to cover their tracks.”

Ramsay’s blue eyes narrowed; his wand lowered just slightly.

“...That has nothing to do with the children,” he said lowly. “They need to focus on their schoolwork – anything going on in the world outside is for the *Ministry* to deal with.”

“Ah yes, the Ministry’s been *so* efficient in such dealings previously,” sneered Snape.

“Never said they were,” Ramsay shot back, “but it’s still *their* responsibility – *they* are the ones who need to step up.”

“As they did last time?” Snape asked coolly.

Ramsay’s sharp blue eyes flickered.

“It won’t be like it was last time,” he murmured.

Snape’s lip curled. “Wishful thinking.”

His cold black eyes flickered vaguely over Ramsay’s shoulder in the direction of the staircase. Ron quickly ducked behind the wall to avoid Snape’s gaze.

Snape then lowered his wand and took a step back away from Ramsay.

“Be wary, Ramsay,” he said coldly. “Your belief in a just world blinds you to the way things are. I’ve known other men who likewise believed in a just world, and they were just as foolishly wrong as you are.”

With a sweep of his billowing black robes, Snape turned and strode away down the hall.

Ramsay glared after him, slowly returning his wand back to the inside of his robes. Then he turned, his blue eyes running over the wall.

“...Come out now, whoever you are.”

Ron flinched. Then, very slowly, he stepped out, guilt stamped on his face.

Ramsay blinked. “Ron?”

“I’m sorry, Professor – I wasn’t trying to listen in, really,” Ron said quickly. “I was just heading down to the kitchens, since I couldn’t go to Apparition lessons, and I heard you talking and...well, I figured you wouldn’t like being interrupted.”

Ramsay’s expression softened.

“...Of course,” he said quietly. “I don’t suppose I would’ve wanted to interrupt teachers while they were talking either.”

He paused. Then he offered Ron a smile.

“...I know – why don’t you stop by my office for a cup of tea? I have some time before my next class.”

Despite his lingering discomfort, Ron smiled.

“Okay.”

He came down the remainder of the stairs and the two strode down the hall side by side.

When they reached the Potions classroom, Ramsay led Ron past the rows of desks. On his own, large cherrywood desk were several tall jars filled with some sort of silvery white grass, as well as two bottles of orangey skin-like material that Ron recognized at once.

“That’s boomslang skin, isn’t it?” Ron asked. He and Harry had had to help Hermione steal some of it from Snape’s storeroom in their second year.

“Ingredients for the seventh years’ Polyjuice class,” Ramsay explained with a nod. “I had to swing by Diagon Alley to buy the boomslang skin, but thanks to the full moon last weekend, I was able to pick the fluxweed myself...potions work so much better if you can get all the materials fresh...”

The two walked past Ramsay’s desk to the door at the back, which Ramsay opened to reveal his office. The room itself looked almost like a tiny studio apartment, with an enchanted window showing off the Hogwarts grounds behind his desk and a tiny yet fully equipped kitchen taking up the right-hand side. There was a cauldron set up next to the stove and a set of shelves along the opposite wall full of potion ingredients and cookbooks.

Ramsay shifted a picture on his desk to the side to make some more room and, once Ron was seated, he put down a plate of his Mint Chocolate Truffles on the desk between them. Ron popped one in his mouth excitedly, reveling in the flavors.

“How is it?” asked Ramsay.

“As good as Harry said they were,” Ron answered with a grin.

Ramsay smiled proudly. With a flick of his wand, he summoned the teakettle and poured them each a cup. Ron took a sip; when he picked up the cup, however, his eyes were drawn to the picture Ramsay had moved.

The photograph was of Ramsay and two women, one a short, older woman with hair and eyes the exact same color as Ramsay’s and the other slender, chestnut-haired, and very pretty. They were all talking and laughing as they sat around a table covered in large plates of food positioned next to a Christmas tree covered in blinking lights, as if they were celebrating the holidays. Ramsay’s photogenic self also kept mutely moving his mouth, and judging by the women’s reactions, the

jokes he was telling were pretty awful.

“...Is that your family, Professor?” asked Ron.

Ramsay noticed Ron’s gaze and smiled, holding his cup of tea in both hands.

“Yes. That’s my fiancée, Tana...and my dear old mum.”

“They look pretty nice,” said Ron.

Ramsay laughed. “Trust me – they’re even nicer than they look.”

His blue eyes ran fondly over the picture for a moment.

“...Whenever my life’s gone wrong,” he said lowly, “those two have always reminded me how good things could be.”

Ramsay’s words brought several faces, unbidden, to Ron’s mind – Hermione’s – Harry’s – Ginny’s – his mum and dad’s – Fred and George and Charlie and Bill –

...Percy...

The image made Ron’s heart clench angrily, and he mentally shoved it away. His anger must have shown on his face, as Ramsay looked at him with some concern.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Ron said quickly.

It had been really hard to think about Percy. Yeah, Ron and he never really gotten on that well before the War, but that still hadn’t hurt any less when Percy cut himself out of the family. Ron

remembered how much Mrs. Weasley had cried after Percy left, and he still caught her crying about it to Mr. Weasley when they thought he and Ginny couldn't hear. She was worried about what might happen to Percy, since he was so entwined with the Ministry and was refusing to contact any of his family...and Ron couldn't blame her, really – after all, she'd lost both of her brothers during the First War...

"It won't be like it was last time."

Ramsay's words echoed back to Ron, slowly sliding his and Snape's argument back to the front of his mind.

"Professor," he said slowly, "about what you said in the hall..."

Ramsay's blue eyes grew a little more solemn. Ron pressed on, despite a flicker of hesitation.

"...Is it true, then – that a Muggle-born attacked a Pureblood?"

Ramsay frowned deeply. After a short pause, he put his cup down with a soft *clink*.

"...Apparently so. We don't know many details, since the only printed report came from the *Stormer* and Scrimgeour and the Ministry have been refusing to comment...but apparently there was some sort of an argument and it ended in Ida Cromwell lunging at the man and beating him up badly enough that his face was covered in black bruises."

Ron's blue eyes narrowed slightly. "So...she *was* probably provoked."

"Yes – or she could have been under the Imperius Curse," added Ramsay with a short nod. "Even if she hadn't been, it could very well have been a personal dispute. But without anyone delving deeper...it's impossible to know."

"But *you* think she's innocent," Ron pointed out.

Ramsay leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms.

“I knew Ida at school,” he said lowly. “She always was very up-and-down when it came to her moods – when she was sad, she was like a dementor hovering about, and when she was happy, she was over the moon. I would not put it past her to do something reckless...but this was *beyond* reckless, this was *dangerous*. I wouldn’t have thought Ida could feel the kind of rage needed to beat someone that badly.”

Ramsay gave a small sigh.

“...But...even I must acknowledge that I haven’t spoken to Ida since we were at school...and even then, I only knew her in passing. I can’t claim any sort of deep knowledge about her character.”

Ron bit the inside of his lip. Ramsay leaned forward, placing his arms down on the desk.

“Ron, as much as I understand the temptation to worry about this, I want you to forget about it. You have the finale to think about, after all. Don’t worry about the War – there are many responsible adults around you that will ensure your safety.”

Ron wanted to believe Ramsay so badly...but no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t. Still he put on his best smile and finished his cup of tea before heading back upstairs.

Movement on the Map

The following morning Ron told Harry and Hermione about what Ramsay had said on their way down to breakfast.

“As always, Ramsay’s determined to act like we should just do *nothing*,” Harry said scornfully.

“I know...I just don’t *understand* it,” grumbled Ron. “I mean...Ramsay’s smart – and he *hates* when people don’t put in the proper work...so how can he be so...*okay* with just sitting back and letting the Ministry handle things? And hell, he could at least give the *Order* its fair dues – ”

“If he did, then he’d have to admit Dumbledore was right to bring the Order back together,” Harry said dully. “Ramsay *hates* Dumbledore, remember?”

“True,” granted Hermione. “It’s like Dumbledore said – people find it far easier to forgive someone for being wrong than for being right. Professor Ramsay probably doesn’t want anything to do with Dumbledore, at least when it comes to the War...but Ramsay so clearly *hates* the Death Eaters. It’s a shame that he can’t get over whatever trouble he had with Dumbledore in the past and work together with him...”

Ron nodded. “I know – I mean, they clearly *can* work together, they’ve been judges together for a while. But when it comes to the War, Ramsay just – ”

He was cut off abruptly, however, when Dean abruptly shoved past him, Harry, and Hermione to catch up with Ginny, who had already started up the staircase on the far end.

“Ginny! Ginny, *wait!*”

Ginny, however, looked to be in no mood to talk. Her face was very red and her eyes were full of tears.

Ron and Harry, their faces both flashing with concern, tried to chase after them. Unfortunately Ginny was small enough that she was able to evade all three of them, and she disappeared into the crowd, leaving Dean stranded at the bottom of the stairs.

When Ron, Harry, and Hermione caught up with Dean, Ron whirled on him immediately, looking furious.

“What did you do to my sister?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” Dean insisted.

Harry noticed he looked just as upset as Ginny had been – his brown eyes were weak and almost shaky.

“Don’t you *dare* give me that,” Ron snarled, yanking his wand out of his robes and pointing it right at Dean’s face. “*What did you do!?*”

“Ron!”

A black hand reached up and snatched hold of Ron’s wrist. Ron looked back, to see Bridget standing beside him.

“Put your wand down,” she said lowly.

“But – ”

“Put it *down*,” Bridget repeated more firmly.

Ron looked at Dean – the dark-skinned boy’s eyes were filling with tears that he tried desperately to hide. Slowly and reluctantly, the youngest Weasley boy lowered his wand.

Dean, who was still avoiding everyone’s eyes, abruptly shoved past them and left up the stairs without a word. Bridget watched him go, her eyes unreadable.

“They broke up,” she explained quietly.

“*What?*” said Harry, startled. “*Why?*”

Bridget’s black eyes ran over Harry’s face. For a moment Harry was almost reminded of Snape’s gaze, in how it felt like Bridget was looking right through him.

“...I don’t reckon that’s your business, Potter,” she said coolly.

“*What?*” said Harry again, though this time more offended.

“*Bridget!*” said Ron in irritation.

“Well, it’s *not*,” said Bridget, her tone bluntly straightforward. “I don’t think it’s *anyone’s* business except for Ginny and Dean’s.”

She turned and started heading up the stairs, her patched green schoolbag flopping against her shoulder as she went.

“It most certainly *is* my business!” Ron called half-heartedly after her. “I’m her *brother!*”

“Bridget’s right,” said Hermione firmly. Harry and Ron both tried to argue, but she cut them off. “Ginny wouldn’t want you two to butt in and you know it.”

The two boys deflated visibly. As much as they hated to admit it, Ginny probably *would* be just as angry if not angrier with them if they “tried to defend her honor.”

Hermione gave them both sympathetic looks. “Come on...let’s get some breakfast.”

No one saw Ginny or Dean for the rest of Thursday. Most agreed they were likely avoiding

everyone else just as much as they were each other. A few times Ron grumbled to himself that when he saw Dean again, he'd hex him into next week, but Hermione stepped in each time to remind him to stay out of it. Harry couldn't help but feel similarly to Ron – he kept mentally conjuring up terrible scenarios of what Ginny and Dean's argument must've been like, some with Dean hitting Ginny and others with the two of them yelling so loudly that their heads swelled up to ridiculous sizes in Harry's mind's eye.

Clearly the argument had *not* been so theatrical, however, judging by how just about everyone was gossiping about Ginny and Dean's break-up and yet no one seemed to know how it had happened or why they had done so. All anyone seemed to know was that Ginny and Bridget had been talking in the Great Hall, Dean had come up to talk to Ginny, and the argument had both been very quiet and finished within the span of a few minutes. At one point a few Gryffindor students had tried cornering Bridget so they could interrogate her about it, but Hannah and Ernie Macmillan had both swooped down on the group within minutes and docked Gryffindor five points.

"I don't care *what* your reasoning was, harassment is harassment," Ernie scolded them pompously. "And if we see you do it again, we'll make it twenty."

Hannah nodded, her brown eyes very reproachful. "Now run along – I'm sure you have classes to get to."

Despite his irritation about the event, Ron had to force his concern about Ginny away for a short while. The finale was on Friday and he *needed* to be ready, so he spent the rest of the day reading cookbooks and practicing in the kitchens. Fortunately Astoria had come to the same conclusion, and she ended up being pretty good company in the library and the kitchens. She had borrowed a lot of helpful cookbooks from Arjuna and quickly decided that the best way to practice for the finale was to pretend to cook a Christmas dinner, so as to work on all of the usual dishes they might be asked to make – appetizers, entrees, sides, desserts, and even drinks.

"I was talking with Kevin the other day," she told Ron as she checked on both her and Ron's pies in the oven, "and he mentioned that he'd like to start a formal cooking club. That way we can still meet up and cook together, even after the contest's over..."

"That'd be awesome," said Ron brightly as he mixed the dough for his raisin bread. "I mean, I'll have to do it around Quidditch, of course..."

"Cho will have to as well, I suppose," Astoria said thoughtfully as she returned to the fresh pumpkin juice she was making. "And I know Owen's in the Gobstones Club...but we can negotiate the schedule, so it doesn't conflict."

Ron smiled. "It's kind of weird, you know? To think, it's almost all over..."

“Yeah...” Astoria smiled absently. “Yet it feels like *forever* ago since we started...I mean...at the beginning of the competition, I didn’t know anything about any of you, except maybe that you were Gryffindor Keeper and Cho was Ravenclaw Seeker...”

“And now we’re friends,” Ron said with a grin.

Astoria smiled a little more fully, her light blue eyes sparkling a little as she nodded.

That evening, Ron rejoined Harry and Hermione in the Great Hall and they enjoyed the feast together, trying not to think about how Ginny was nowhere to be seen. Several more students came up to wish Ron luck, including Cho and Hannah, who each gave Ron a big hug.

“I’ll be waving a Ravenclaw banner tomorrow, of course,” Cho said with a smile, “but I know you’ll do well, Ron – you always do.”

Ron smiled. “Thanks.”

Cho at one point glanced at Harry, but both of them seemed to silently agree that there was nothing they wanted to say to each other, so Cho merely waved to Ron and returned to the Ravenclaw table.

When the feast was over, Ron went up to bed nice and early so that he’d be well rested. Harry, on the other hand, was not sleeping well. As Ron snored, he lay awake in bed, watching Ginny’s dot on the Marauder’s Map.

She’d been hanging out at the Astronomy Tower almost all day and was only just now heading downstairs...probably so that she could head up the right set of stairs toward Gryffindor Tower. Harry fancied the idea of waiting down in the commonroom for her...maybe to ask her himself if she was okay, and what had happened...

Then a dot with a familiar name crossed quickly past Ginny’s in the drawn hallway.

Draco Malfoy.

Harry straightened up in bed.

Malfoy's dot was moving very fast – like he was running. Why was he running...and where to?

Malfoy's dot swept across the Map and down the stairs toward the dungeons.

Harry relaxed visibly – the Slytherin commonroom was down in the dungeons. He probably was just making sure he wasn't caught out of bed after hours –

Wait.

Malfoy *wasn't* running to the Slytherin commonroom. To get to the Slytherin commonroom, you had to turn right down the stairs – Harry remembered Ron and he had to turn right when they followed Malfoy down the hall in disguise as Crabbe and Goyle in second year. But Malfoy had gone to the *left*...

'He's heading for the kitchens,' Harry realized.

He was right. Malfoy was heading straight for the room marked "Hogwarts Kitchens," where one other lone dot was moving.

Bridget Jaheem.

Feeling a flash of concern, Harry reached instinctively for his Invisibility Cloak. As soon as he did, though, he hesitated.

He'd focused so much on Malfoy earlier that year – he'd almost lost both Ron and Hermione's friendships over it...

His hand clenched over his Cloak.

This was *serious*, though. Malfoy *hated* Muggle-borns, and Bridget had had her fair share of bullying in the last month already for her ancestry. *Ron* would've wanted to make sure Bridget was

okay, if he was in Harry's position – but there was no point in waking him up, when he had to worry about the contest tomorrow...

He wouldn't tell Ron, Harry decided. He'd just make sure Bridget was okay.

So Harry swept his Cloak on, snatched his wand off his side table, and left the dorm, barreling down toward the kitchens as fast as he could with the Map in hand.

'Stay there – stay there,' Harry thought desperately as he watched Malfoy's dot enter the kitchen slowly. *'Don't do anything until I get there – '*

He dodged several ghosts as well as Filch the caretaker and dashed down the stairs to the main level as quickly as he could without letting anyone hear him. When he reached the base of the stairs, Harry checked the Map – Malfoy's dot had just collided with Bridget's.

Panic-stricken, Harry picked up his pace, dashing freely down the thankfully empty hallway. It felt so long that even though Harry knew he was moving quickly, every minute felt like an eternity. He swung himself around corners, hurrying toward the stairs that led to the dungeons.

Bridget and Malfoy's dots were on top of each other on the Map – were they arguing? Was Malfoy threatening her?

When he finally reached the stairs, Harry nearly jumped down them. He landed at the base of the stairs and ran down the hall. Finally Harry caught sight of the portrait of the pear that led to the kitchens. He skidded to a halt, scaring some student's white cat that had been prowling behind a suit of armor.

The portrait was already open, with Bridget standing just outside. To Harry's surprise and relief, however, she looked perfectly unharmed – in fact, she looked almost pleasant as she brushed some white cat fur off of her black skirt and headed back into the kitchens, the portrait swinging shut behind her.

Panting heavily, Harry returned his gaze to the Map. Malfoy had just arrived at the part of the hallway just outside the Slytherin commonroom.

'Did she...not see him?' Harry wondered to himself. *'Or...did he just not do anything?'*

Both options seemed highly unlikely...but, despite his misgivings, Harry slowly turned and headed back upstairs.

'Don't worry about it,' he scolded himself. 'Ron needs your attention, your focus – don't worry about Malfoy and whatever stupid stuff he's up to...it's probably nothing...nothing...'

But Harry couldn't help it. No matter how much he bottled them up and how much he knew he'd never tell Ron or Hermione about them...he still couldn't fully force the thoughts about Malfoy's shady behavior from his mind.

Round 6: Finale

At long last, the day of the MagicChef Junior finale arrived. It was a perfectly sunny Friday, and Harry could feel the school's enthusiasm rippling through the air. When he, Ron, and Hermione left the Gryffindor commonroom that morning, countless people stopped them on their way down to the Great Hall, shaking Ron's hand and wishing him luck before the final round.

When they reached the Hall, they noticed that Luna had come to sit at the Gryffindor table, wearing her old lion hat with a new eagle topper that occasionally flapped its wings.

'She must not have been able to decide whether to support Ravenclaw or Ron,' Harry surmised with a grin, *'so she chose both.'*

Sitting next to Luna at the Gryffindor table was Neville, who couldn't stop glancing up at Luna's hat amusedly, and Ginny.

The trio immediately bustled over.

"Hey, Ginny," said Harry.

Ginny offered him a smile, though she looked a touch pale. "Hi, Harry."

"Are you okay?" Ron said at once. "Did Dean do anything to you, 'cause if he did, I – ow!"

Hermione elbowed Ron pointedly in the side, shooting him a reproachful look. Ginny frowned.

"I'm just fine, thanks," she said coolly. "And Dean didn't do anything, except maybe be a pushy git – so all anyone has to do is not be one of those, and there won't be a problem."

Ron winced as Ginny turned away. Despite the lack of anger or sorrow on her face, her bad mood still clung to her like a gray storm cloud. Harry recognized the body language immediately – he'd gotten like that sometimes the previous year, when he was feeling sorry for himself...and he really

didn't like the look on Ginny.

"Ginny..." Harry started uncomfortably.

Before he could finish, however, a brown tawny owl abruptly landed on Ginny's plate. It stuck out its leg to show off a package wrapped in red wrapping paper and tied with a shiny purple bow.

Ginny blinked. Then, after a second, she recovered enough to take the package off the owl's leg and read the note on top.

"Who's it from?" asked Harry.

"Dunno – there's no name," Ginny said with a frown, glancing at Harry out the corner of her eye confusedly before reading the note aloud. "'Whenever you smile, roses burst into bloom. Keep that brave smile on; I know you'll find the right one someday.'"

She then opened the package – inside were a cluster of cake pops molded into the shape of red roses and tied together with a purple ribbon.

"Oh, how lovely!" said Hermione.

"Must be a secret admirer," Luna commented dreamily, "unless there are any thumb-kissing selpucks hiding in the rafters –"

"Even if there were, I doubt they'd use owls," said Neville with a grin.

Harry's stomach twitched uncomfortably as Ginny's brown eyes ran over the fake bouquet. Ron picked out one of the "roses" and sniffed it suspiciously.

"Red velvet," he said lowly, and his mouth upturned in something of a mischievous smile. "Could be poison, though. As prefect, I'm afraid I'll have to confiscate the lot – you know, for *security* purposes –"

“In your dreams!” scoffed Ginny, giving Ron a good smack on the back of the head as Neville and Hermione laughed.

Despite Ginny’s words, her familiar, gorgeous smile was already winding itself back onto her face as she took the cake pop back from Ron and returned it to the box with the others.

“...Well, whoever sent them, they’re quite pretty,” she said offhandedly, her smile brightening up her face significantly. “Though it makes no sense to eat one for breakfast – I think I’ll drop them off in the dorm and have one after lunch.”

Ginny was noticeably more chipper during the rest of breakfast. Harry was glad to see she was feeling better, though a tiny part of himself wished that it had been because of something he’d said or done, rather than the work of some secret admirer. That mean-spirited wish felt like an unpleasant thorn in Harry’s side, and he forced it out of his mind as much as he could, hating himself for even thinking it.

‘If Ginny’s happy, that’s the important thing,’ he told himself forcefully.

Fortunately seeing Ginny’s cheerful, flushed face and being reminded of a gorgeous sunrise made it easier for Harry to push his more negative thoughts away.

After breakfast, Harry, Ron, and Hermione headed down to Potions with Professor Ramsay. The class centered on antidotes, which were complicated even by Potions’ standards.

“To create an antidote properly,” explained Ramsay, “one needs to reverse-brew the recipe for the original potion – providing for the irregularities in temperature and the placement of the planets – and must counteract any and all after-effects with additional ingredients.”

Just about nobody could get the hang of it except Hermione, who won Gryffindor twenty points for knowing what ingredients could best counteract the Draught of the Living Death. Ramsay then placed a series of antidotes on the table at the end of class and had everyone come up and pick one to do an essay about, which would be due the following week. Harry was one of the last students to reach Ramsay’s desk, and all that was left was a short bottle labeled “Hair-Renewing Potion” and a cluster of reddish stones, which everyone seemed to have bypassed. It took Harry a second, but once he realized what the stones were, he picked one out, tucking it into his pocket.

“Well, great,” sighed Ron, “now that the contest’s almost over, I’ll actually have to *do* Ramsay’s essay – and of course it’s a bloody mad one...”

“You and Harry will just have to study up,” Hermione said smugly, “since the *Half-Blood Prince* didn’t seem to be of much help this time...”

Harry shot Hermione a sour look.

At noon, Ron bid Harry and Hermione goodbye and headed down to the dungeons to meet with Astoria and the judges, fending off more wishes of good luck as he went. After lunch, however, Professor McGonagall came by the Gryffindor table to speak to them.

“Potter, Miss Granger, Miss Weasley...I’ll need you to come with me, please.”

Harry and Ginny exchanged a surprised look; then they and Hermione obediently rose to their feet and followed McGonagall out of the Great Hall.

“Professor,” said Harry, “is something wrong? Is Vol – ”

“Nothing’s wrong, Potter,” McGonagall said calmly, as she brusquely escorted them up the stairs. “You three are simply needed in the Headmaster’s office.”

“Why?” asked Ginny.

They stopped in front of Dumbledore’s office; McGonagall glanced back at them, a ghost of a smile touching her face, before she turned back to the gargoyle guarding the doorway.

“Turkish delight.”

The gargoyle hopped aside, and she led the three into the office. Almost as soon as they entered the room, there was a loud, joyful squeal, and suddenly a round, ginger-haired woman had leapt forward out of her seat and lunged at Harry and Hermione, wrapping her arms around both of them

in a squeezing hug.

“M-Mrs. *Weasley*!?” choked Harry.

“*Harry! Hermione!*” squealed Mrs. Weasley gleefully. “Oh, Minerva, *thank you* for bringing them too – Ron will be so excited – ”

“It was my pleasure,” McGonagall said with a dewy smile.

Ginny looked from McGonagall to her mother in surprise. “Wait, so – it’s not about the War, it’s about Ron?”

Mr. Weasley nodded, smiling broadly.

“Professor Dumbledore asked Gryffindor and Ravenclaw’s head of houses to arrange for their finalists’ families to sit in a front box during the finale...so that we can support Astoria and Ron when they compete.”

Mrs. Weasley released Harry and Hermione and the two shakily steadied themselves. Once they had regained their center of balance, they looked up to see Fred, George, Bill, Fleur, and Charlie were also there. Fred and George had planted themselves on top of Dumbledore’s desk, their legs dangling off the edge like they were kids, while Charlie was leaning his back up against the wall and Bill was sitting in a comfy chair with Fleur in his lap. Sitting beside Dumbledore’s desk in a set of delicate white chairs were Professor Flitwick, Daphne Greengrass, and a witch and a wizard who had to be Daphne and Astoria’s parents.

Daphne clearly followed more in her parents’ footsteps than Astoria did, judging by their crisply tailored dress robes and their prim postures. Both of them had brown hair like their daughters, though Mr. Greengrass had unreadable brown eyes and olive skin, while Mrs. Greengrass was paler and had sharp eyes that were the same shade of blue as Astoria’s. Mr. Greengrass had a neatly trimmed beard and a curled-up mustache and Mrs. Greengrass had styled her hair in an intricate up-do with about thirty pearl-encrusted hairpins. It gave them a pretentious air that reminded Harry immediately and unpleasantly of the Malfoys.

“But – ” Hermione said hesitantly, glancing from Mr. Weasley to Mrs. Weasley, “but Harry and I aren’t family – that space should be for *you* – ”

“*Nonsense*, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said kindly. “Why, after all the times you and Harry have visited us, all these years...you both are *more* than family, to us.”

Harry couldn't keep himself from smiling. Mrs. Weasley brought a hand through his dark hair and patted his cheek fondly.

“And besides,” she said brightly, “I know Ron will be beyond *thrilled* to have you both there, cheering him on! Just imagine – my little Ronnie, about to win a contest hosted by *Gordon Ramsay*!”

Harry did not miss the unmistakable flash in both Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass's eyes in response to Mrs. Weasley's words. They did not, however, verbally respond, instead choosing to merely stew in cold silence, but Harry still felt as though the temperature in the room had suddenly dropped a few degrees.

About an hour later, the Greengrasses and the Weasleys plus Harry and Hermione headed out to the Quidditch Pitch. As they strolled up the field to their two front boxes, Harry flinched in response to the white flashes that rippled over them. Glancing to his right, he noticed a familiar blue-haired reporter with cat's eye glasses scribbling on a piece of parchment while her partner, a shorter man with curly ginger hair and an overbite, snapped away with his camera.

Noticing Harry's disdainful gaze toward the reporters, Ginny took hold of his arm and pulled him along after her.

“Don't worry about them,” she reassured him. “People like that are like mountain trolls, I reckon – ignore them, and their tiny brains will get diverted elsewhere.”

Harry laughed.

They settled down in the left of the two front boxes; Harry sat between Mr. Weasley and Charlie, just behind the shorter Hermione, Ginny, and Mrs. Weasley. The stands nearby were also slowly filling up with student spectators, many of whom were carrying banners. Ravenclaw's stands were a sea of blue “*Astoria is our Ace*” banners, while red “*Weasley is our King*” banners had taken over Gryffindor's. Slytherin and Hufflepuff were a little more evenly split, but by and large it looked like Hufflepuff was mostly red and Slytherin was mostly blue.

'How many of those Slytherins are only supporting Astoria because she doesn't come from a family of "blood traitors?"' Harry couldn't help but think scornfully.

Finally the four judges – Ramsay, Dumbledore, Slughorn, and Bagnold – strolled out onto the field. Dumbledore, Slughorn, and Bagnold had all dressed in their school colors, but Ramsay, predictable to form, was still dressed in chef-worthy white.

“Welcome,” proclaimed Dumbledore. “Welcome, one and all...to the grand finale of MagicChef Junior!”

The stands roared with applause and the reporter's camera flashed wildly. Dumbledore eased the crowd into silence by merely holding up a hand and slowly lowering it.

“May I introduce our two finalists – first we have an innovative young wizard who has time and again come up from behind to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat...from Gryffindor house... Ron Weasley!”

Everyone cheered as Ron dashed out from under the stands onto the field. He stopped in front of Dumbledore and looked up at the stands, his face spread into a huge grin.

“GO, RON!” screamed Charlie, his hands cupped around his mouth like a megaphone.

Ron turned, recognizing the voice, and his eyes landed on his family in the left front box. Harry immediately started singing “*Weasley is Our King*,” and Ginny, Hermione, Fred, and George quickly jumped in, singing even louder and more off-key than Harry, much to Fleur's disapproval.

Ron flushed scarlet, his blue eyes shining excitedly.

“Hi, Mum!” he called even though he couldn't be heard over all the cheering, waving broadly at them. “Hi, Dad – you guys!”

Mrs. Weasley was as red as Ron, and her eyes flooded with tears as she waved back, squeezing her husband's hand in a deadly vice grip with the other.

“Second,” said Dumbledore, once again quieting the crowd with little effort, “we have a brilliant young witch who in every round has shown the heart needed to learn, lead, and win...from Ravenclaw house...Astoria Greengrass!”

Astoria dashed out onto the field after Ron, stopping next to him. As she turned toward the crowd, she looked less excited than Ron, but it was clear that it was more due to her dislike of the spotlight than anything else. Her blue eyes sparkled as she looked over the Ravenclaw stands, as if she was hoping to see one particular face more than any other. When she noticed her family sitting mutely in the right front box, she seemed less encouraged than Ron had been – her smile faded momentarily at the sight of her parents, and she pointedly looked away back up at the stands.

Ron took a covert side step closer to Astoria.

“You okay?” he whispered.

Astoria kept her eyes on the stands as she nodded.

“Yeah – I never wanted or needed their approval anyhow,” she said quietly. “If I win, then I’m getting out of their house – and nothing they say will stop me.”

Ron glanced over at the Greengrasses, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“...Just looking at your parents, I don’t blame you. I reckon Daphne’s probably itching to fly the coop too, eh?”

Astoria snorted dismissively as Bagnold faced the crowd.

“Today, for our final challenge, our two finalists will have to make us a formal five-course meal, complete with their best dishes! The only rules are that each course – soup, appetizer, salad, main course, and dessert – must be filled, but other than that, any kind of food goes!”

“You will only have 90 minutes to complete your five-course meal,” said Ramsay. “Your time starts...*now!*”

It was amazing how frenzied 90 minutes could be. Astoria and Ron raced to their stations, met up with their house elf partners Poppy and Dobby, and got to work, hurriedly putting together their menus for the judges. For everything that needed to be done, an hour and a half was not nearly enough time – Ron had to prepare the crusts for his miniature honey-baked ham meat pies while also mixing together a shallots vinaigrette for his roasted pepper salad, checking on his oysters bouillabaisse, and regularly stirring his Potato soup on the opposite stove.

Then, right in the middle of everything, Slughorn stepped forward in front of the workstations and addressed the crowd.

“Halt the clock!”

The giant clock that had been projected onto the stands abruptly froze with 60 minutes remaining. Both Ron and Astoria looked up at Slughorn, who was beaming.

“Every chef, when in the industry, has to deal with sudden changes,” he said jovially, “so we judges have a little *present* for you.”

With a wave of his wand, he summoned two tall, green glass bottles from the judges’ table, plopping them down on the countertops at Ron and Astoria’s stations.

“We have bought you two bottles of the finest elf-made rum, shipped specially from Budapest,” said Slughorn, “which you will have to incorporate in one of your five courses. And don’t think simply putting it in a glass on the side will do,” he added with a waggle of his finger when the crowd gave a shocked gasp, “we want to taste that flavor in the dish you present to us!”

He tucked his wand back into his robes and strolled back to the judges’ table with a flourish of his hand.

“As you were, clock!”

The clock started counting down again.

Ron quickly examined the bottle, reading the label carefully.

‘Elf-made – pot still – what flavors go with rum?’

His blue eyes fell on the unfinished treacle tart he’d been making for his dessert, and they lit up.

Treacle could work – he could just modify his mother’s old recipe, like he had for her cream pie –

Ron immediately dumped out the treacle filling he’d been working on and started again, adding the lemon juice and zest, treacle syrup, cream, and breadcrumbs and then slowly mixing in the rum. When he thought it looked about right, he grabbed a spoon and gave the filling a taste – it was great!

With a big grin, he put the treacle tart down on the stove for a moment and returned to his miniature meat pies.

‘I’ll have to put them in together, for them to finish around the same time,’ he thought, *‘so better catch up with these first...’*

He hurried to finish the honey-baked ham pies while still keeping an eye on both his soup and his bouillabaisse, lining the tiny pastries up in a row on a cookie sheet.

“45 minutes left!” called Ramsay’s voice in the distance.

‘Better get the tart and the pies in right now,’ Ron thought anxiously. *‘The pies will need 35 minutes to bake – ’*

He wiped his brow, which was doused with sweat. The heat in the kitchen was incredible. It was dizzying and sickening, to the extent that it could make one feel ill...but, Ron supposed, with two burners and the oven going simultaneously, it was little wonder that his station felt like Hell itself.

Ron picked up the cookie sheet with the meat pies and headed for the oven. He blinked the sweat out of his eyes as he opened the oven door and slid the cookie sheet in.

“Master Weasley?” said Dobby suddenly – Ron had almost forgotten he was there. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” said Ron distractedly.

What did he need now? Oh right, the tart! Ron picked it up, but as soon as he bent down, he suddenly felt a bizarre burst of pain surge through his stomach.

“*Ulk!*”

Ron hunched in on himself, trying to keep himself from dropping the tart.

“Master Weasley!”

Dobby darted over, clutching Ron’s arm with his knobbly hands.

“Master Weasley, are you all right?”

“I – feel sick – ”

A barrage of painful, multicolored lights were attacking his eyes, blinding him. Ron fell to the ground, and he heard a *clang* next to him that had to belong to the treacle tart’s pan.

“*Master Weasley!*”

The kitchen was spinning – the world was spinning – Ron couldn’t see anything, no matter how hard he tried to blink the lights away. His mouth felt dry and numb – he felt his own saliva dribbling down his shirt, as if it had completely bypassed his lips.

“Ron?!”

A familiar voice echoed over him – a female one – Astoria’s? Ron tried to say something, but it felt like he couldn’t move his mouth – even though he knew he was opening and closing it, he didn’t feel any of the muscles move –

“Ron!”

“*Ron!*”

More voices started screaming his name, though Ron couldn’t pick out whose they were. So hot – so cold – the tips of his fingers felt like they were on fire – his throat was burning – yet he kept shivering, unable to shake the horrible chills scraping down his spine –

Someone was screaming and crying hysterically. A pair of strong, rough hands grabbed onto Ron, clutching his shoulders and trying to hold him up.

“Get me my bag! *NOW!*”

Ron couldn’t feel his legs – he tried shaking them, shaking his arms, everything – they shot out in unpleasant, frenzied lashes – and with every shudder, they started to numb – like they were disappearing –

“*Ron!*” a voice echoed, somewhere far, far away. “Take this, Ron – eat it!”

Another hand clutched the back of Ron’s head, supporting it as the other forced something down his throat. He choked, trying to dislodge it, but the hands clamped his mouth shut –

“Come *on*, Ron, *swallow!*”

He couldn’t breathe – the foreign object was blocking his breath – he had to swallow the thing, just to get it out of his windpipe –

All at once, the hot, cold, numbing, frenzied horror halted. Still blinded and unable to hear a thing, Ron collapsed, his mind going black.

Round 6: Aftermath

Ron was taken to St. Mungo's immediately for poisoning. Madame Pomfrey said that because he had not been treated within the first minute of ingesting the poison, it had filtered into Ron's veins, making it impossible for her to treat it on her own. The only reassurance she could give Mr. and Mrs. Weasley was that Ron could not have ingested that much – if he'd had any more than a milligram of the stuff, his body would've shown symptoms much sooner.

As Ron was taken away on a stretcher with the Weasleys following behind, Dumbledore brought an arm around Harry and escorted him, Hermione, and Astoria off the field. Harry was so numb and terrified that he didn't even realize that the flashes of light flickering over his eyes belonged to the *Daily Prophet* reporter's camera.

The three were brought up to Dumbledore's office to wait while the judges sorted everything out downstairs. Dobby brought them some hot chocolate, but none of them could bring themselves to drink it. Astoria was very pale as her blue eyes drifted aimlessly around the room, unable to focus on anything. Hermione was hunched up in the armchair by the fire, clutching at her sleeves and crying quietly. Harry sat on the floor, hugging his knees tightly.

If he hadn't remembered the Prince's scribbled note about bezoars in the antidotes chapter of his book and taken one from Ramsay's desk that day, Ron would've died out there on the field. What was happening to him now, at St. Mungo's? Had Harry given him the bezoar in time? Would it... not be enough...?

Images of Ron saving goals during their last Quidditch practice, flushing from head to toe at the sight of them...offering him corned beef sandwiches on the Hogwarts Express...all flickered through his mind.

'He'll live,' Harry reproached himself, closing his eyes fiercely to block out the flood of tears. 'He'll live, damn it – he'll live.'

Harry had no idea what he'd do if he didn't...

A set of footsteps quietly entered the room. Harry abruptly opened his eyes and looked up – Dumbledore had returned.

Harry, Hermione, and Astoria all shot to their feet.

“What happened?” Harry asked at once. “Is Ron – ?”

“He's resting at St. Mungo's,” Dumbledore said calmly. “He's still unconscious, and the poison has caused some damage to his spinal cord...but the Healers say that he'll be all right.”

Both Astoria and Harry exhaled. Hermione burst into tears of relief, covering her face with both hands.

“What was it, Professor?” asked Astoria urgently. “What was poisoned? Why didn't...?”

“The rum we assigned you was, unbeknownst to us, laced with a deadly mix of hemlock and aconite,” Dumbledore explained. “Judging by the broken seal around the bottles...it seems that after we purchased them and put them in storage, someone opened the bottles, added the poison, and then resealed them without anyone noticing. We found the same poison in the rum filling you were mixing at your station, Astoria.”

Harry glanced at Astoria out the corner of his eye – she had gone very pale.

“Chocolate liqueur lava cakes are one of Daphne's favorite desserts,” she mumbled, looking ashamed. “We've substituted rum before when there wasn't any liqueur in the house, so I didn't have to taste-test it the way Ron would've had to for his...”

“Do you know who could've done it, Professor?” asked Harry.

Dumbledore peered at him solemnly over his half-moon spectacles.

“The house elves stored the rum in the kitchens for safe keeping,” he said quietly. “We questioned them about the kitchen's visitors...and they informed us that there was only one person down in the kitchens that night – Bridget Jaheem.”

All three students looked horrified. Harry felt his stomach crumple up in his chest.

No – that *hadn't* been the only person there that night. The Marauder's Map had said so, hadn't it? He'd shoved it off, thinking that it must've been a mistake – he hadn't wanted to worry about it, because he knew no one would believe him, but –

“No,” Harry said forcefully.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“Bridget didn't do it,” he repeated firmly. “She would *never* have hurt Ron.”

Astoria nodded in passionate agreement. “She wouldn't have done it, Professor – it's not in her character – ”

Dumbledore held up a hand to stop them.

“I agree...but despite her clear distress, I must confess that Bridget was not forthcoming in her explanation. She told us that she was merely making a present for someone, but when pressed would not name the recipient of the gift.”

Astoria and Harry exchanged a look of confusion; Hermione's eyes widened in realization.

“With her lack of cooperation...there are many who will not believe her story,” Dumbledore said gravely, “even though Professor Ramsay, Horace, Millicent, and I all agreed that she is not responsible.”

Harry was at a loss. Hermione, however, was not. She puffed out her cheeks angrily, which made her rather resemble an overconfident puffer-fish.

“Well, damn those people, then!” she said forcefully. “Bridget wouldn't have done it, and logically speaking, she *couldn't* have! How would she have even *known* about the rum in the first place? You decided to add it to the challenge in a closed-door meeting, right – like you did with the other rounds? And no one else knew about the surprise before it happened! Bridget *couldn't* have known!”

The level of passion in Hermione's voice surprised Harry.

Dumbledore smiled. "One can only hope that everyone is as astute as you, Miss Granger."

Astoria looked from Hermione to up at the Headmaster.

"But...*why*, Professor?" she whispered. "Why was the rum poisoned in the first place? It couldn't have been meant for Ron..."

Dumbledore exhaled quietly. "That, I'm afraid...we cannot know."

"Professor," Harry said sharply, "the necklace Katie was carrying was supposed to be brought up to the school – to y –"

But Dumbledore silenced him with a look.

"I will ask that all of you refrain from theories until after the culprit is caught," he said solemnly. "No doubt your classmates will develop plenty of them in the meantime...but they are not worth your time or attention, at present."

Hermione and Harry exchanged a concerned look. Astoria's blue eyes widened in dismayed confusion, drifting from Harry to Dumbledore and back.

"Now then," Dumbledore said quietly, "Astoria...your family is waiting outside; they wished to see you. Harry...Hermione...Molly requested you at St. Mungo's – you may use my fireplace."

Astoria glanced briefly at Harry and Hermione, her mouth opening as if to say something, but the words seemed to stall on her lips. Her light blue eyes rippling sadly, she inclined her head respectfully to them, before turning and leaving Dumbledore's office.

'What could I even say, anyway?' she thought to herself. *'They're Ron's best friends – they'll take care of him, so there's no point in me asking them to do so. Plus they're probably worried enough as it is...'*

As the gargoyle leapt aside, Astoria's stomach clenched anxiously. Just as she anticipated, Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass and Daphne were waiting outside for her, their posture prim and proper as ever. When they saw her, Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass immediately stiffened like startled cats. Daphne stepped out from behind them and stopped a good foot in front of her sister.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Her tone was much too hard to be considered caring and her face, however pale, was unreadable... but Astoria noted how Daphne's eyes ran over her face for any sign of injury.

"...Yes," Astoria said lowly. "Ron's been sent to St. Mungo's, but the Healers say he'll recover."

"Did the Headmaster perhaps mention whether or not they've discovered the culprit?" Mr. Greengrass asked. There was an unmistakable sneer in his voice at the mention of Dumbledore.

Astoria's eyes narrowed. "He said they hadn't yet, but they're investigating it."

Mrs. Greengrass gave a low scoff.

"As to be expected, Dumbledore shows his incompetence in protecting the children assigned to him...it's a shame Lucius was discovered with the Death Eaters, he showed more concern for the children of Hogwarts as a school governor than Dumbledore has in his entire tenure – "

"Hard to show *concern for students* when he tried to kill a handful of them at the Ministry of Magic," Astoria shot back coldly.

Mrs. Greengrass whirled on her daughter, her blue eyes widening dangerously, but Mr. Greengrass stepped between them.

"Mind your words, Theia," he murmured to his wife soothingly. "Remember where we are...and that Astoria's emotions are understandably temperamental, given what she just witnessed..."

Mr. Greengrass's brown eyes narrowed upon Astoria.

"...She knows full well that her mother simply feared for her safety."

Astoria's blue eyes flashed. "If she did, she has a funny way of showing it."

Daphne shot Astoria a reproachful glare around her father's arm, which Astoria ignored.

"We have told you many times, Astoria, of the value of keeping your emotions contained," Mr. Greengrass said solemnly. "And in our present world, that advice has more value than ever."

Astoria crossed her arms and looked away.

"Astoria, you will *look* at me when I'm speaking to you," Mr. Greengrass said sharply, making her look up at him.

His eyes were cold, but there was something flickering in the back – was it anxiety?

"This compassion you feel for lesser witches and wizards," he murmured, "you must bury it deep – do you understand?"

Astoria opened her mouth angrily, but her father cut her off by taking hold of her arm and pulling her closer.

"The Dark Lord is rising," he whispered, his tone even quieter than before and betraying some concern. "There are rumors that he is trying to infiltrate the Ministry – they won't publish anything about it in the *Prophet*, so I doubt they've reached you here – but everyone who works in the Ministry is well aware of them. If the rumors are true, then anyone who sympathizes with Dumbledore and his pro-Muggle leanings could be considered an enemy – "

"Good," spat Astoria. "I would never want to be seen as an ally of theirs anyway."

Mr. Greengrass's eyes flashed with a bizarre mix of rage and terror; his grip tightened sharply on

his daughter's arm and he shook her once.

"*Antony!*"

Mrs. Greengrass grabbed onto her husband's shoulder. The grip immediately made Mr. Greengrass's hold on Astoria slacken – Astoria stepped back very quickly, her blue eyes flaring furiously at her parents. Mr. Greengrass, clearly regretting his error at once, tried desperately to compose himself; his face grew very stony.

"You will keep your political opinions to *yourself*, young lady – that is not a request."

"I don't care if it is or isn't," Astoria shot back. "It's bad enough I have to keep my mouth shut and my head down whenever you have the Bulstrodes or the Carrows over, but you can't tell me what to do or say while I'm at school – "

"We can and we *will*, or you'll be continuing your education at *home*," said Mr. Greengrass coldly.

Astoria's eyes widened furiously.

"...Fine," she said icily. "Then I'm leaving!"

Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass reacted in something akin to horror.

"Don't be *ridiculous*, Astoria," Mr. Greengrass said, and his tone was unusually shaky, "you cannot hope to sustain yourself in the Wizarding World at just 14 – "

"I'll find a way," Astoria snapped.

"Your emotions are running away with you," Mr. Greengrass said forcefully, as if he was desperately trying to tamp her down. "You cannot *seriously* think – "

"I've been thinking about it for *years!*" retorted Astoria. "I figured I'd just up and do it after winning the prize money, but oh well, I'm sure I can find a place before term's up – "

“Astoria Charna Greengrass, you will do *no such thing!*” Mrs. Greengrass said, her temper clearly rising. “I *forbid* it!”

“Hey, I know – why don’t I move into a *Muggle* apartment complex?” sneered Astoria, her tone almost mocking despite her bile. “I wouldn’t have to worry about you lot and your disgusting pureblood mania *there*, now would I?”

“Shut your *trap*, Astoria!”

Everyone froze where they were. They then very slowly turned to look at Daphne.

She was paler and angrier than Astoria had ever seen her. Her brown eyes were flaring like flames and the clenched fists at her side were shaking.

“Don’t you get it?!” she yelled. “They’re *worried* about you, you idiot! The War’s getting worse and the Dark Lord’s getting stronger, so they want you to keep your head down even while you’re here so that you don’t get yourself killed! Ron had to have been poisoned by a Death Eater – probably the same one who thought it was a great idea to give Katie Bell that cursed necklace! That means there’s a Death Eater already near or maybe even *inside* the school! And if there is, that means he could know that your best friend’s mother is practically a Squib, or that you’re taking Muggle Studies, or that you’re cooking in the kitchens with Muggle-borns on a daily basis! Whatever the *bloody* hell you think about the Death Eaters, Mother and Father *care* about you!”

Astoria tried unsuccessfully to shake off the shock at Daphne’s outburst.

“You...you sure don't act like it – ”

Daphne strode forward and seized both of Astoria’s arms roughly.

“This is bigger than some stupid family feud about *house placement!*” she shouted. “You could've *died*, Astoria! Was I mad that you were Sorted into Ravenclaw? Of *course* I was! I thought for sure we’d be in Slytherin house together, and that I’d have at least *one* person to confide in, even though I had to hide my true face with everyone else! Of *course* I was bitter about the fact that you shed everything with ease, making friends and letting loose, while I had to stay stoic and perfect and gorgeous! Of *course* I resented that you put more value in education and academics than you did on your own family!”

Tears pricked at the corner of Daphne's eyes. The sight scared Astoria more than anything else had in her life – she'd never once seen her sister cry.

“But even with all that, I'd never want you *dead*, and *obviously*, our *parents* wouldn't either! You – you – *IDIOT!*”

Daphne shoved Astoria backward, turning away and crumpling in on herself to hide her upset face. Both Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass looked just as stunned as Astoria was. Mrs. Greengrass stepped over toward Daphne as if wanting to comfort her, but seemed to have no idea how to.

Astoria stared at her older sister, speechless. Daphne had shut herself off as soon as Astoria had been Sorted into Ravenclaw – all these years, she'd assumed she'd only done so because of their parents, blindly following their silent condemnation of Astoria's choices. Never had she considered that she'd maybe felt jealous of Astoria, or resented that Astoria didn't have to play the part that she still had to play all the time...

“Fifi...”

Daphne flinched at the familiar nickname. Astoria stepped forward, reaching a hand out to her sister.

“Fifi, I...”

Tears were streaming down her face, but unlike Daphne, Astoria didn't have the strength to hold them back. In a single move, she swept forward, bringing both of her arms around Daphne and hugging her tightly from behind.

“...I'm sorry,” she croaked. She closed her eyes as more tears slid free. “I'm so sorry. I wasn't trying to choose academics over you. I just thought...that you *hated* me – that you *all* hated me... just like you hate all the other ‘*blood traitors*’ you know...so I tried to forget you...run away, and find my own way, by myself...”

Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass exchanged dismayed glances – both of them had their mouths open and looked like they wanted to say something, but looked to be at a loss for words. Finally Mr. Greengrass stepped forward, bringing a hand onto Astoria's forearm gently.

“...We don’t *hate* you, Astoria,” he said at last. His tone was as cold and level as always, but his eyes were oddly beseeching – as if he wished beyond reason that she would believe him.

“Your...sympathies for lesser beings may *disappoint* us,” added Mrs. Greengrass, her sympathetic tone marred by discomfort, “but we could never *hate* you.”

Daphne forcibly restrained the tears in her brown eyes as she looked from her parents to down at her little sister.

“Haven’t you ever wondered why Father never joined the Death Eaters?” she murmured. “It’s because of us – I figured that out, after Draco’s father was sent to Azkaban. If he joined and was either caught or killed...well, where would we be?”

Astoria looked upon her parents, her tear-filled blue eyes confused and surprised. Mr. Greengrass smiled weakly.

“Admittedly they’re a touch *brutish* for my taste, as well,” he said, though there was something like cynical humor in his tone. “Far too many Killing Curses in their arsenal and not enough brain cells.”

He brought his hand down Astoria’s arm, resting it just over her elbow.

“Regardless of our difference in politics, Astoria...I will always choose you over anything else,” he said firmly, his tone no less stoic but much less cold. “However the world sees me, or whatever happens in the rest of the world, doesn't matter, as long as my family remains safe. And as much as I wish you would follow our example and solely look after yourself...with the War brewing, I *must* look after your well-being first...you must understand that.”

Astoria actually flinched trying to suppress the shaking of her shoulders.

“I’m not like you,” she choked. “I can’t just *do nothing* while the world burns.”

Mr. Greengrass’s eyes ran over his daughter’s face, but he seemed not to know how to respond. Instead he merely looked down at the ground, his hand still resting on Astoria’s arm. Daphne

brought her arms around Astoria, resting her head on her shoulder.

“Then don’t,” she murmured. “Just...be *safe* about it.”

Astoria broke down in silent sobs as Daphne squeezed her tight and Mr. Greengrass held her arm. Mrs. Greengrass never moved forward to comfort her daughter, but she brought her arms around herself, almost holding herself as she struggled to restrain her own tears.

For the first time in the Greengrass family’s history, they all stood alone in the hallway outside Dumbledore’s office and cried together.

St. Mungo's

“...But – but Healer Jengu, surely...*surely* with the proper treatment – ”

“He will recover, yes. The damage to his spinal cord is nothing we can’t repair, fortunately, but the poison still very nearly killed him. It will take both time and diligent care for his body to recover from such a trauma.”

“How – how long will it take?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Weasley...but I do not know. I’m afraid the only one who’ll be able to determine that is Ron himself...”

Those three voices were talking about him, Ron realized...but his brain was moving slowly. What were they talking about? Something about poison...?

He felt restrained – was he tucked into bed? He tried to shift around, so as to make himself more comfortable...but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t summon the strength needed to move. His grunting got the attention of the voices’ owners.

“Ron?”

“Ronald, can you hear us?”

Ron slowly blinked open his eyes.

The room felt very bright. Ron flinched involuntarily and squinted as he tried to acclimate to it, but slowly everything came into focus, from the sterile white walls to the lime green curtains beside his bed to the two familiar people sitting beside him.

“Mum?” he mumbled. “Dad?”

Mrs. Weasley shrieked in a kind of grief-stricken relief, and in an instant, she'd plastered herself over Ron and burst into hysterical sobs.

"Oh *Ron* – my Ronnie – thank *Merlin* – "

Ron was so stunned he could barely feel his mother's arms around him. His blue eyes darted around to the sterile walls, his father's more restrained tears, and the uncomfortable bed and sheets he was trapped in confusedly.

He was in St. Mungo's?

A man stepped forward, standing just behind Mrs. Weasley. He had to be a Healer, judging by his lime green robes; his skin was as dark and his head was as smoothly shaved as Kingsley's, but he was younger, smaller, and more slender. His sharp-lidded eyes immediately reminded Ron of Professor McGonagall, but they were much less intimidating on such a soft, oval-shaped face, particularly when he offered a very small, gentle smile.

"How are you feeling, Ron?" the Healer asked. He spoke slowly in an articulate, yet calming tone that was the vocal equivalent of a leisurely walk in the park.

Ron tried adjusting again, but he still couldn't seem to summon the proper strength. Was his mother really inhibiting him that much? Yet she didn't feel heavy...

"A bit uncomfortable, honestly," he mumbled. "What happened?"

The Healer's face became a little more solemn.

"You unknowingly ingested a poisonous potion containing aconite and hemlock," he explained. "Fortunately your friend Harry happened to have a bezoar on hand – thanks to his quick thinking, you survived."

"Harry..." mumbled Ron.

That was the voice that had been begging him to swallow something – something that must have

been the *bezoar*, he realized – and the voice of the person who had been holding him up was –

“Ramsay!” he burst out in realization. “The contest – ”

He tried to bolt out of bed, but once again he couldn’t move. He tried harder – trying to kick his legs –

And that was when he realized: he wasn’t moving due to lack of strength.

Ron blanched, his eyes going very wide.

“My legs – I can’t move my legs – ”

“Ron – ” Mr. Weasley started.

Ron barely heard him. He tried desperately to sit up – he had to see –

“I can’t – I can’t move! I can’t – ”

Ron frantically tried to kick his legs, shake his arms, sit up...but it felt like nothing was there. It was like he was shouting down an empty hallway and getting no response. Panic was setting in – his eyes were filling up with tears of frustration and horror as he tried desperately to move, but nothing he did made any difference –

“*Ron*,” the Healer said in a commanding, yet still tranquil voice.

Ron froze. He felt like he should’ve been shaking in terror, looking up into the Healer’s kind, gentle face...but he couldn’t.

“Ron, the poison damaged your spinal cord,” the Healer said quietly, his expression very solemn. “It’s put your nervous system into shock and made it shut down, paralyzing you from the neck down.”

“No,” mumbled Ron. “No, no...”

“We’ve already lined up all of the potions required to heal that damage,” the Healer pressed on, trying to keep Ron calm but also remaining frank, “but I’m afraid that your treatment will be very intensive. You will have to take daily potion dosages at allotted intervals over the course of a week, and after that, you’ll have to take concentrated physical therapy classes for several weeks so as to reestablish the nerve connections that link your brain to various parts of your nervous system.”

Ron felt ill. It felt like everything the Healer was telling him was being told down a dark hallway, echoing into his ears and rattling around painfully in his skull.

Mr. Weasley sat down on the other side of his son and took his hand. Ron’s stomach shriveled up at the sight of his father’s fingers closing around his own – he could not feel Mr. Weasley’s touch at all.

“It might take some time, Ron,” he said gently, “but Healer Jengu is confident that you’ll recover.”

As much as Ron knew that his parents were comforted by this and wanted him to be as well, he really wasn’t. He looked from Mr. Weasley to the Healer called Jengu.

“...How did I get poisoned?” he asked. “What...what was it? Who did it?”

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley exchanged worried looks. Jengu looked solemnly at Mr. Weasley, before returning his gaze to Ron.

“...The investigation is still on-going,” he admitted grimly. “There is a student suspected, but the Headmaster has expressed doubts...”

“Who’s the suspect?” demanded Ron.

“That Slytherin girl,” Mrs. Weasley said agitatedly. “Suppose she got the bright idea to take revenge on *my son*, after he beat her to the finale – ”

“*WHAT?!*”

Ron tried to shove himself out of bed so violently that, because he couldn’t move and he didn’t have a wand in his hand, a flare of pent-up, emotional magic exploded out of him, making a large crack bolt up through one of the white walls.

“*Ron!*” gasped Mrs. Weasley.

“BRIDGET WOULD *NEVER* DO THAT!” Ron roared. “HOW COULD THEY THINK IN A MILLION BLOODY YEARS THAT SHE’D – ”

“Ron, calm down,” Jengu tried to soothe him.

“Ron...she was the only one in the kitchens the night before the finale,” Mrs. Weasley attempted to explain, suddenly looking ashamed at her son’s distress.

“THEN SHE – WAS – FRAMED!” shouted Ron. “DUMBLEDORE *CAN’T* THINK THAT SHE – ”

“He *doesn’t*, Ron,” Mr. Weasley cut him off softly. “None of the judges believe that Bridget had anything to do with it...they won’t punish her.”

Ron breathed hard, trying to regain his composure. His face was still flushed scarlet.

With a wave of his wand and a nonverbal spell, Jengu repaired the broken wall. Then he came to sit down beside Mrs. Weasley next to Ron’s bed.

“I’ll be honest with you, Ron,” he said patiently, “the road to recovery is not going to be easy...but if you want to get better, I need you to give me all the energy, focus, and optimism you can. It will take a lot of work and a lot of resilience, and I can’t act like there may not be any residual damage...but I know that when everything’s said and done, you’ll be able to walk out of St. Mungo’s on your own two feet.”

Ron looked up into the Healer's sharp-lidded eyes – they seemed confident.

“...I'll be able to play Quidditch again too?” he asked weakly.

Jengu smiled broadly, and Ron was immediately reminded of Bridget's much more blindingly white grin.

“In time, yes.”

Ron offered a weak smile. Jengu lightly patted his hand (which, once again, Ron couldn't feel), before getting up and turning to the door.

“Now then...perhaps I should go fetch the rest of the family from the waiting room, since Ron's now conscious.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Weasley tearfully.

Jengu left the room. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley turned to Ron.

“Ron, I'm so sorry,” whispered Mrs. Weasley, her eyes filling with tears. “I d-didn't know Bridget was your friend...I immediately assumed – ”

“S'okay,” Ron replied halfheartedly.

If they hadn't become friends, would he have automatically assumed that Bridget would be the sort of person to poison someone who beat her in a contest, just because she was a Slytherin? Ron wasn't sure...but the thought felt like a chill down his spine.

He looked up at Mr. Weasley restlessly. “...What about the contest? How am I going to finish it, if I'm stuck here?”

Mr. Weasley shook his head. “...I'm afraid...judging by the gravity of what happened, that Professor Ramsay may decide not to reinstate the contest.”

“*What?* But – ”

“Ron, you were nearly *killed*,” Mr. Weasley cut him off sharply. “Considering someone purposefully placed the poison in that bottle, one can only presume it was a murder attempt, though we don’t know who it was meant for. Hogwarts has had its share of misfortune throughout the years, but this is serious. I would not be surprised if tomorrow morning the *Daily Prophet* has a full spread about it...”

“But...the prize money,” Ron said weakly, “the reservation...”

He looked at his mother desperately. Mrs. Weasley brought her hand gently through Ron’s hair; Ron gave a slight flinch, as he’d half expected not to feel that either.

“Ronnie, your life is more important to us than any prize,” she mumbled, her eyes filling up with tears again.

Before Ron could say anything, dissenting or otherwise, the door opened.

Jengu held it ajar as a large group of people flooded into the room – Ginny, Fred, George, Charlie, Bill, Fleur...and just behind all the manes of red hair were two figures, one with messy black hair and glasses and the other with big, unruly brown curls.

Ginny arrived at her brother’s bed first. Like Mrs. Weasley, she threw both of her arms around Ron’s neck and clung on with all her strength.

“Ack!” choked Ron. “E-easy, Ginny – I can’t breathe!”

She loosened up only slightly as she looked at him in her best attempt at reproach. “Well, don’t bloody *scare* us like that, you dim-bulb!”

Despite her blustering, she clearly had been worried; her brown eyes were perfectly dry, but her face was very white, which made her freckles pop out sharply on her face.

“How are you feeling?” asked Bill.

“Okay, I guess,” said Ron.

He looked up at Harry – both he and Hermione looked very pale, but they were both smiling in relief. Ron smiled back.

“...Guess I’ve got you to thank, Harry,” he said, his blue eyes flickering with fondness. “You’re a right hero, you know that?”

“Come off it,” Harry said dismissively, his cheeks flushing around his smile. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Hermione came over to sit next to Ginny and Mrs. Weasley, taking Ron’s hand and squeezing it tightly. Ron wished more than ever than he could feel her grip, or that he could squeeze her hand back.

“So when are you coming back to school?” Hermione asked hesitantly.

Ron looked down. Mrs. Weasley brought a hand onto Hermione’s shoulder.

“I’m afraid, dear...that it might take a while.”

She and Mr. Weasley explained Healer Jengu’s diagnosis. The rest of the family looked dismayed, but none more so than Ginny.

“But – ” she choked, “ – but the match against Hufflepuff is in *two weeks*!”

She looked back at Harry anxiously. Harry looked concerned too, though less overtly, and he kept his composure as he turned to Ron.

“We’ll figure something out,” he said firmly, his green eyes boring into Ron’s even though he was also talking to Ginny.

Ron knew Harry well enough to know he was putting on a brave face, but Ron took comfort in it all the same. He felt terrible enough without having to think about how he'd let the entire Gryffindor team down by being out of commission...

The Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione stayed with Ron for a half-hour before Jengu requested that they leave so that Ron could get some rest before he had to take his first three doses of healing potions. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley said that they, Bill, and Fleur would be back in a few hours. Fred and George told Ron they'd come back in the morning bright and early before work. Charlie had to return to work in Romania, but he said he'd be back to visit that weekend. Ginny, Harry, and Hermione had to return to school, but they promised to write to Ron every day.

"Hey...Harry?" said Ron.

"Yeah?"

"Look after Bridget, would you?" he mumbled. "Make sure she's okay, and...and if anyone even tries to blame her for what happened to me – "

"Then we'll hex 'em black and blue," Ginny said firmly.

Hermione and Harry both nodded.

"Thanks," whispered Ron through a weak smile.

When they and Jengu had all left the room, Ron felt as though he had suddenly been set adrift in a complete vacuum, turning over sickeningly in mid-air.

He'd never been completely alone before in his life. When he was younger, he'd fantasized about it sometimes – thinking about how great it'd be, to not have to share anything with anybody or having to sacrifice sleep because someone was blowing things up in the room downstairs at odd hours...but now that he was completely on his own, he found that he didn't like it one bit.

Enrouge

It didn't take long for Ron to decide he hated being stuck on the Third Floor of St. Mungo's. The rest of Ron's first day was devoted to sleeping and taking various unpleasant potions. Some of them burned his throat, while others made him feel nauseous, but all of them were painful to recover from; in the hours after Ron took any of them, the potions' effects would make him feel like he was getting punched all over or his spine was being crumpled up like a piece of paper. The intense pain made it very hard for Ron to sleep, so Jengu had had to also give Ron sleeping potions so he'd get the proper amount of rest, but even with that potion helping him sleep, Ron's dreams were fitful enough due to the pain that it wasn't pleasant.

The morning after Ron's admittance to the ward, Fred and George returned as promised, but they looked noticeably irritated. They'd brought a whole assortment of merchandise from Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes to cheer their brother up, including Wildfire Whizz-Bangs and noisemakers – but the Healers had forbidden almost all of it, as they were concerned that it would disrupt the other people in the ward. Still, they were able to pin up a whole bunch of enchanted banners around Ron's bed, and he found at least a little entertainment in watching crowns, broomsticks, and the words "*Weasley is our King*" fly across the orange and red streamers over his head.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley arrived an hour after Fred and George had left for work. They had brought a birthday cake, but it had undergone an hour's worth of tests before it could be let through. After feeding him a slice of cake, Mrs. Weasley tended to Ron diligently, fluffing his pillows and adjusting his blankets, but Ron noticed early on how pale and quiet Mr. Weasley looked. He didn't speak at all while Mrs. Weasley distracted Ron with talk of Ramsay visiting the family the previous night, and his focus kept drifting over to the fake window on the other side of Ron's bed, which was enchanted to show a cheerful blue sky with puffy white clouds.

"Dad?" Ron said at last. "Are you okay?"

Mr. Weasley was startled out of his thoughts. He looked at Ron and then at Mrs. Weasley, whose expression had turned almost reproachful.

Mr. Weasley put forward his best smile. "Oh yes, Ron, I'm...fine."

Ron didn't believe him. With a frown, he glanced from one parent to the other.

"...Did the *Prophet* say anything about the contest?"

“There...was an article this morning, yes,” Mr. Weasley admitted. His eyes were still on his wife’s face. “Though it mostly just said what we already know...”

Mrs. Weasley brought a hand through Ron’s bangs gently.

“Some reporter tried to get in here for an interview,” she said brusquely. “It’s just fortunate Healer Jengu was able to put her in her place before we got here, or else I would’ve given that woman a piece of my mind!”

From what Ron gathered, Jengu had been very preoccupied with protecting Ron from the press. At one point Ron overheard two of the Assistant Healers gossiping in the hallway outside about how Jengu had shut the door on one reporter’s hand when he tried to shove himself inside the ward while Ron was sleeping.

Unfortunately it wasn’t just the press that was being kept out. Although Harry, Hermione, and Ginny had promised to write everyday, Ron didn’t get any letters from them the first three days...they hadn’t even sent a birthday card! When he’d expressed his concerns to Jengu, the Healer’s expression turned incredibly guilty.

“...I suppose that’d be because of the new security measures,” he said lowly. “Out of concern for our patients’ safety, St. Mungo’s president Augusta Feverfew decided three days ago to appoint a new security team to examine all packages and letters coming in and out of St. Mungo’s for potential threats.”

Ron’s stomach dropped. “*Three days* – you mean when I arrived? She appointed more security because of *me*?”

“Not because of you,” Jengu said bracingly. “Remember last year, there was the potted Devil’s Snare that was smuggled into St. Mungo’s...and admittedly, these security measures were already enacted in other wizarding facilities like the Ministry and the Leaky Cauldron earlier this year...”

Ron’s critical gaze made the Healer trail off uncomfortably.

“...And...your poisoning...may have been a factor in Feverfew reconsidering the issue, yes,” he finally acknowledged as a mutter.

Ron felt his whole face flushing in shame and upset. Jengu offered a faintly strained, pleasant smile.

“Tell you what – I’ll send a special request to the security team to inform me whenever a letter or package for you has arrived, and when we can expect it to reach you. That way at the very least, you’ll have something to look forward to.”

Jengu seemed to know his suggestion wasn’t much; still, figuring it was the best he could do given the cruddy circumstances, Ron forced a small smile in return.

“...Okay.”

The following day Ron *finally* received Harry’s first letter. The envelope had been ripped open unceremoniously and there was a distinct smell of stale socks emanating off of it.

“It seems your friend wrote something that the security team wanted to record,” Jengu murmured grimly as he slid the folded letter out of the torn envelope.

Ron looked up in confusion. “Record – you mean, like they *copied* it?”

Jengu nodded as he took a seat at Ron’s bedside. “They soaked it in a Replicating Potion – that smell reeks long after its use.”

Although he kept his face placid, his posture was a bit stiffer and his voice was a touch cooler than usual in his response. With a glance over his shoulder at the other two patients in the ward (who were both distracted by their visiting relatives), Jengu then turned to Ron with a more serious expression.

“Ron,” he said very quietly, “you must signal to your friends to mind what they say. The Ministry has become very frightened of what people are saying to each other – enough that they are monitoring every word.”

Ron was reminded of Umbridge watching the Owl Post and Floo Network the previous year, in the hopes of digging up dirt on Dumbledore or finding out Sirius’s location.

“B-but – ” Ron stammered, “*why*? We’re not with the Death Eaters – Harry would *never* be with the Death Eaters – ”

“Of course not,” Jengu murmured. “But unfortunately Scrimgeour has more rivals than just the Death Eaters...and right now, he’s having some difficulty discerning who is a threat and who isn’t.”

Stan Shurnpike’s arrest rippled through Ron’s mind, and he clenched his teeth, his blue eyes drifting down to his sheets.

Jengu unfolded the letter and began to read it out loud for Ron.

March 1st, 1997

Dear Ron,

Happy birthday! I wish you were here with us for it, so we could celebrate properly, but your birthday presents are on the way and will hopefully be there by tomorrow. I know it’s only been one day since we saw you, but Hermione and I both really miss you. Hogwarts is just not as much fun without you here.

The Daily Prophet published their article about the finale this morning. It’s rubbish, as to be expected. Not only did it take up the entire front page and two inside pages, but it also tried to spin the thing as “an act of terrorism against the next generation of upcoming witches and wizards” and blamed everyone from Ramsay to Dumbledore to Scrimgeour for not putting more security measures in place to protect us. It even tried to say that Fudge should never have removed the High Inquisitor position, as if there’d been one, he or she could have done something to prevent what happened! Clearly they’ve forgotten that the last High Inquisitor was Dolores Umbridge, and she never lifted a finger to protect anyone! The reporter also claimed that she tried to interview you, but the Healers prevented her from entering the ward. I’m glad for that, at least.

Terence Goodfellow published a new article in the Prophet today too, even if the editor squeezed it into a tiny corner to make room for the MagicChef story. I think it was written before the finale, since it didn’t talk about the contest, but Goodfellow asked your dad for his opinion regarding a new bill proposal in the Wizengamot that would relax the Statute of Secrecy. This guy called Enrouge thinks that Muggle-born witches and wizards should be allowed to tell their Muggle friends and family members who aren’t included in the Statute’s exceptions (like godparents and spouses who haven’t given birth to magical children) so that they can better protect them from Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Most of the Wizengamot seem to really not like the idea, but your

dad put in a nice word for Enrouge. He didn't seem to agree with Enrouge's idea, but he said his heart was in the right place. Hermione thinks that the Wizengamot's probably scared about the idea of revealing the Wizarding World to Muggles, but I don't know, I think Enrouge might have a point. If Sirius hadn't been a wizard, I'd really want him to know about Voldemort and me so he could've stayed safe.

Bridget's all right. The rumors have already started milling around school about her having been in the kitchens that night, but it seems like they're not bothering her too much. Bridget told us that as long as you know she would never hurt you (which we reassured her was true), she didn't care if the whole world thought she did. I don't really get why she isn't more concerned about it, though – Pansy and her crew said something about the Stormer having more details in their report than the Prophet did, though we haven't yet found out what she meant. Whatever those details are, though, I can't help but feel like they'll be trouble, whether they're true or not.

Cormac McLaggen came up to me as soon as Charms was over and asked me about the Keeper position. Since he was second best at try-outs, I had to bring him on board as your substitute, but I still don't like him. Hermione doesn't either – she says that he's an absolute boor with no respect or sense of personal boundaries.

Dumbledore and I have another meeting scheduled this month, just before the match against Hufflepuff. He says there are some details he wants to share with me that might help us with that project we're working on. Won't be able to write about it, of course, but hopefully we'll be able to convince Dumbledore to let us visit you on the weekends sometimes and we can tell you about it then.

A lot of people have come up to us saying they're sending you flowers and cards. Bridget's sent a package off already too, though she didn't tell us what it was. As for us, Hermione says she'll write our letter tomorrow, after we get done with Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Write back whenever you can!

Harry

Ron couldn't hold back the small, warm smile that spread across his face as he listened to his friend's words being read aloud. It was like he could imagine Harry in the room with him at that very moment.

Jengu likewise smiled down at Ron. "That's some friend you've got there."

“Yeah,” mumbled Ron, his face flushed with pride.

Jengu glanced down at the letter, the smile slowly fading from his face. Then, folding it up again, he slipped both it and the envelope under Ron’s mattress.

“Best not to let anyone else read that,” he said under his breath.

Ron felt a pang of admiration for Jengu. It seemed that despite his pleasant exterior, he also had some real grit underneath – and he clearly had a good moral compass.

“...What do you reckon the security team was interested in?” Ron asked lowly. He had a few ideas, but he wanted Jengu’s opinion.

Jengu glanced briefly over his shoulder at his other patients, verifying they were both still preoccupied with their families before responding.

“...The sympathy for Enrouge’s position, I suppose. I’m sure you know as well as I do how controversial such a proposal is.”

Ron nodded. Mr. Weasley had always been enamored with Muggles, but he’d well instructed his children about the Statute of Secrecy and how important it was to mind it. After all, as much as Mr. Weasley believed Muggles were by and large good, just as witches and wizards were, he also knew that uprooting their entire worldview could be very traumatizing and could lead to severe consequences...hence why the Ministry had to employ so many Obliviators to erase or modify Muggles’ memories when they witnessed the use of magic.

“It’s...well, it’s not entirely *right*, maybe,” Ron said slowly, “but I don’t think Scrimgeour should be afraid of something like that – I mean, he’s fighting the *Death Eaters*! That’s much more of a threat than some guy trying to open up the laws so people can protect their loved ones...”

“You’re right,” Jengu said softly. “It *is* much less important.”

He folded his arms over his chest.

“Enrouge – and the people who agree with him – believe that the draconian split enforced between the Wizarding and Muggle Worlds is why the Death Eaters have been able to sway so many witches and wizards to their side in both Wars. It is ignorance – bred from lack of knowledge about Muggles, their culture, and the amazing technology they’ve produced in place of magic – that breeds the prejudice, fear, and hatred that the Death Eaters use to turn sane people into monsters. Therefore the thought is...that if we tear down the wall between our two worlds...then we can come together and create a new one of peace, harmony, and mutual respect.”

Ron *wanted* to like what Jengu was describing, but something in him made him give pause.

“But...that wall between the worlds does more than just separate us,” he said slowly. “It protects us too. I mean, when Muggles *did* know about witches and wizards, they tried to hunt us down and burn us at the stake...”

“Muggles are more reasonable than they were in the past,” Jengu pointed out.

“Some are,” Ron argued. Harry’s relatives, the Dursleys, flickered over his brain. “But some aren’t. And even if they are the reasonable sort, it still would be an awful lot for them to swallow, learning that there’s a whole secret world that they never knew about and that could’ve rewritten their memories or lives without their knowledge or consent.”

“Wouldn’t it be better for us all to tell the truth, rather than hide away?” asked Jengu.

“Sure,” Ron said uncomfortably, “but I still don’t know if we should tell *everyone*. Telling family, that makes sense – but not everyone can be trusted. And even if we tell the Muggles we exist...I don’t think that would make the Death Eaters go away – I think they’d still be there. Who knows, those...blood purist types...they might even feel bolder, knowing that they don’t have to hide anymore! They might decide to openly flaunt their superiority over Muggles, because it’s suddenly perfectly okay to show off who you are!”

Jengu took in Ron’s argument patiently; rather than argue the point, he merely smiled.

“...I suppose one’s opinion of future events can only be proven when that future comes true,” he said levelly.

Ron frowned slightly as Jengu got up. Noticing his expression, Jengu’s expression softened.

“Don’t worry, Ron – I’m not upset that you don’t agree. Difference of opinion is something to be celebrated. After all, if two people aim to do good in the world, a difference in opinion can open their eyes to possibilities they never saw before.”

He then leaned in slightly, his tone growing a little quieter again. “I just hope you will keep what I’ve said in confidence...just as I will keep the contents of your letters completely to myself.”

His words could’ve sounded like a threat, but Jengu kept his tone deliberately calm and nonthreatening. He wasn’t holding it over Ron’s head: simply reminding Ron that he was already doing him a favor.

“...Okay,” said Ron.

Jengu patted him on the shoulder, before turning and heading for the door.

“I’ll be back with your potions in an hour – try to rest until then.”

In a Roundabout Way

Hogwarts was dreary. Ron's poisoning had left a metaphorical cloud over the student body, so much so that when the physical rain clouds arrived two days later, it felt like the weather was sympathizing with their emotional state.

Harry's gloom started instantly every time he woke up in the morning. Even three days after Ron's arrival at St. Mungo's, he still found himself moving over to Ron's bunk as if to go wake him up too, only to remember that he wasn't there and force himself to get showered and dressed. Then he'd meet up with Hermione and Ginny in the commonroom and head downstairs for breakfast.

"Still no word from Ron?" asked Ginny.

"No," said Harry.

Hermione looked concerned. "Do you think he's gotten everything we sent? I know he can't write letters himself, but I would've thought he'd have sent something back by now..."

"Maybe he's just being kept busy with getting better," offered Ginny, though she didn't look too sure. "I mean, there'd be no reason for St. Mungo's to censor his mail, right?"

She glanced at Harry, but he looked just as unsure as she did. After all, Umbridge had certainly convinced the Ministry to let her read all of Harry's incoming and outgoing mail, even though it wasn't the least bit legal or justifiable...

That particular morning the Great Hall was buzzing like an upset hive of bees. Many of them were muttering amongst themselves, looking angry or conspiratorial – Harry also noticed people holding onto a weird paper with red writing that he didn't recognize.

"That's the *Stormer*," said Ginny, her eyes narrowing sharply.

She and Harry immediately started looking around, having both thought to look for Bridget, but she didn't seem to have arrived yet.

“Ginny, intercept Bridget before she gets here,” Harry muttered to her. “Hermione and I will figure out what’s going on.”

Ginny nodded in agreement, her brown eyes flashing at the tables before quickly turning and dashing out of the Hall. Harry and Hermione exchanged a concerned glance before starting their methodical trek to the Gryffindor table.

They found Neville sitting with Lavender, Parvati, Dean and Seamus – all five of them looked anxious and angry.

“Neville,” started Harry, but Neville didn’t even need for him to ask what was going on.

“Someone smuggled in copies of the *Stormer*’s MagicChef report,” he explained, his eyebrows knitting together angrily. “It repeats that rumor everyone’s been spreading – you know, about Bridget in the kitchen? – and also puts forward this bogus theory that she targeted Ron and Astoria for poisoning because of their ancestry.”

Both Harry and Hermione’s mouths dropped open in disgust and shock.

“*What?!?*”

Parvati nodded, looking furious too.

“Cuffe’s trying to claim that Bridget was jealous of their talent and heritage, and so decided to take her feelings of inferiority out on Ron! I mean – I don’t know Bridget all that well, but even *I* know she’s got plenty of talent! And she got a scholarship from Ramsay! She’s got no *reason* to be jealous of Ron!”

“Well, it’s obvious why he wrote it that way, isn’t it?” Seamus spat in disgust, his clenched fists on the table shaking with rage. “That gombeen Cuffe wants to turn this whole thing into a story of the *poor, maligned Purebloods* being under attack by the mean old Muggle-borns, now doesn’t he? Bloody poxbottle – ”

Dean rested a hand on Seamus’s shoulder, squeezing it lightly in an attempt to calm him, even though he looked just as angry himself.

“Some people have been suggesting that Bridget should be suspended until everything’s sorted out,” he said lowly. “Others already seem to think that there’s enough evidence already, and she should be expelled and maybe even arrested.”

Hermione’s cheeks flushed angrily. “That’s rubbish! All anyone knows is that Bridget was down in the kitchens that night, not that she had any contact with the poison! For all anyone knows, the bottles were already poisoned by the time she got there...or maybe they were poisoned after she left!”

To Harry’s surprise, Lavender jumped in to agree. “Right – and besides, Ron’s *friends* with Bridget. It’d be like guessing Hermione or Harry poisoned Ron – it’s just not something they would do.”

Dean turned to Harry and Hermione. “Did you hear anything about why Bridget was down there that night? If she told everyone what she was doing, maybe she’d have some sort of an alibi...”

“She said she was cooking for a friend,” said Harry. “Though she didn’t say who...”

Dean and Seamus exchanged a wary look.

“Clearly she didn’t want that person to get any scrutiny,” Hermione interjected, her voice almost overly firm. “Maybe it was a Slytherin student whose family wouldn’t have wanted her spending time with a Muggle-born! Imagine how much *that* would get blown up at this school, let alone at the *Stormer* – ”

“True,” said Neville. “And let’s be honest – the *Stormer* would’ve suspected Bridget even if she *had* an alibi. Cuffe and his lot don’t trust *anything* Muggle, and that includes people from Muggle families. They’ll spew any story that fits into their gross propaganda.”

Harry looked down at the table, his green eyes narrowing in thought.

‘Neville’s right – nothing Bridget says will help, as far as those people are concerned. The only way to prove her innocence is to catch the person responsible – the real culprit – ’

The memory of Malfoy's dot on the Marauder's Map rippled through his mind again.

'You don't have any proof,' he reminded himself. 'Hermione won't believe you, Ron's stuck in St. Mungo's, and even Dumbledore told you not to try to theorize what had happened...'

Harry glanced around at the others, nodding his head as the other discussed the *Stormer* and Bridget, but barely hearing them.

'If Malfoy's responsible for Ron's poisoning...then I'll just have to prove it myself. Then Bridget can't be suspected anymore...'

Meanwhile Ginny reached the stairs that led to the hallway that she knew held the Slytherin commonroom. Not knowing exactly where the commonroom was, she decided to wait at the base of the staircase. The hallway was quiet and mostly abandoned, though she exchanged nasty looks with one group of fifth-year Slytherin boys as they passed.

After a few minutes, a familiar figure with a green and silver tie, black robes, and intricate braids came around the corner.

"Bridget!"

Ginny dashed up to her, and in a sweeping gesture, she'd looped an arm around Bridget's and yanked her up the stairs.

"Ginny?" said Bridget, startled. "What's going on?"

Ginny led her in a quieter, roundabout way to the Great Hall so they could talk privately. She told her about what she'd seen in the Hall and presumably what everyone had to be chattering about.

"I reckon we should wait until the Hall's cleared out before heading up there," said Ginny, "then you can eat in peace..."

Bridget raised an eyebrow, a soft smirk on her lips. "A little odd to see you so cautious."

“This isn’t about caution,” Ginny muttered sourly. “It’s about making sure that people don’t jump you as soon as you arrive in the Great Hall...”

Bridget’s smirk faded from her face. She stopped dead in her tracks, making Ginny abruptly come to a halt next to her.

“Ginny,” she murmured solemnly. “You don’t have to worry about me – I can take care of myself.”

Ginny turned to her, her eyes narrowing reproachfully. “Bridget, you’ve already been picked on more than once thanks to the crap Uric Cuffe’s published! If this report says what I think it might, you might have to deal with more than just taunts or threats – ”

“Maybe,” said Bridget. “But I can still handle it.”

Ginny opened her mouth to argue, but Bridget plowed on.

“Ginny, I know you and your brother and your friends have it in your heads to protect me from all this, but you can’t always be there...and to be honest, you *shouldn’t* be. I need to take on this burden myself, if I have any hope of overcoming it.”

“Whatever you might have in your head, we’re *not* going to just leave you to the wolves,” Ginny said stubbornly, “and you can’t change our minds on that.”

Bridget’s expression softened slightly.

“...I know,” she said. “And believe me, that...means a lot. But I don’t want you to think you have to selflessly throw yourselves in front of me in some noble effort to protect me from what people might think...”

“You mean the way *you* did?” challenged Ginny.

Bridget raised her eyebrows innocently. Ginny's confident expression didn't shift.

"I know you made those cake pops – the ones that looked like roses? That's what you were making the night before the finale...you just didn't want to tell anyone, because then everyone in school would be gossiping about me...even though it meant everyone would think you were some sort of villain..." Ginny crossed her arms disapprovingly, "...you somehow thought it was more important to protect *my* reputation."

Bridget grinned. "Oh no...no, not your *reputation*...just you."

Ginny frowned in confusion.

"Everyone had already been gossiping like crazy about you and Dean breaking up," said Bridget, "and when Ron got poisoned...well, I knew you'd be worrying about him, even more than I was. If I'd told the judges that you were the person I was cooking for, then they would've had to question you while you were waiting at St. Mungo's, and sooner or later the rumors would swirl around here at school...and I just figured you had more than enough to worry about already."

Ginny's disapproval cleared, leaving her face a little more pensive.

"...Well, I don't care if everyone knows," she said offhandedly.

"You'd want people questioning whether or not you'd date a girl?" Bridget asked, raising an eyebrow.

Ginny shrugged. "Doesn't matter to me."

Bridget smiled wryly, her white teeth gleaming. She started to walk slowly up the hall again, and once Ginny had started to follow, the two both sped up a little, striding together side by side.

"I admit, I didn't think you'd take it so well," said Bridget lightly.

"Why?"

“Most girls don’t.”

“Well, I’m not like most girls,” Ginny said coolly.

Her face then grew a little more serious.

“Bridget...even if I don’t care what people think about me, or if anyone knows you baked those cake pops for me...I have to be honest that I – ”

“Don’t really want to date me,” Bridget finished, though her voice was remarkably casual. “I figured as much.”

“No,” Ginny said at once, her face becoming oddly ashamed. “I just don’t really feel like dating *anyone* right now, honestly. Because I realized something, when I broke up with Dean...no matter who I’ve dated, or how nice that person’s been...I always catch myself dreaming of being somewhere else...*with* someone else...thinking of how *he’d* treat me – like a friend, like a comrade, like an equal – rather than just someone to shield or hold on his arm. No matter how good they are to me, and no matter how wrong I know I am to act that way...I still feel like it’s not enough.”

“Because they’re not Potter.”

Ginny looked up, startled. Bridget laughed.

“Oh come on, you think I wouldn’t be able to tell?” she said good-naturedly. “The way you two look at each other – it feels like you’ve got a million inside jokes just between the two of you.”

Ginny immediately looked guilty, but Bridget rested a hand on her shoulder, her black eyes gentle.

“Ginny, it’s okay. I made you those cake pops because you’re cute and I knew you were going through a hard time – that’s all. And frankly, judging by how Potter reacted to your break-up with Dean...I reckon if he *does* ever ask you out, you probably won’t be disappointed.”

Ginny gave a quiet laugh. “Thanks – but I don’t think he will. It’d probably be weird for him to ask out his best friend’s sister, even if he wanted to.”

“Well, if he doesn’t, it’s his loss,” said Bridget with a grin. “And if you change your mind on dating anyone else, consider sending me a time and place – okay?”

Ginny smiled broadly. “Okay.”

They finally arrived in the Great Hall. Ginny pointedly moved a little closer to Bridget as they walked through the crowd of people leaving through the double doors. Many of them started muttering amongst themselves at the sight of them.

“That’s her – ”

“ – sister – ”

“ – poison her too?”

Ginny’s brown eyes flashed menacingly at them, but Bridget squeezed her forearm lightly without looking at her, silently telling her not to confront them. Keeping her head high and her posture strong, she walked into the Great Hall without a word.

At the sight of Bridget, the students still sitting at the house tables all hushed, turning to gawk at her.

Bridget looked around at the four house tables, her expression rather measured; then with a glance at Ginny, she strode over to her usual place at the Slytherin table. When she tried to sit down, however, Crabbe and Goyle stepped between her and the bench, their arms crossed over their boulder-like chests.

“We don’t want you here, *Magicsnatcher*,” sneered Crabbe.

Despite her confusion at the unfamiliar word, Bridget feigned politeness. “Beg pardon?”

“You heard him.”

Pansy Parkinson strode over, Blaise Zabini, Tracey Davis, and Daphne Greengrass just behind her. Her pug-like face was even more ugly than usual, with her crinkled-up brown eyes flaring with nothing short of hatred.

“Go sit somewhere else,” Pansy ordered her coldly. “We don’t want you here.”

Seeing the trouble, Ginny quickly caught up with her friend.

“Bridget’s a Slytherin,” the youngest Weasley snapped. “She’s entitled to sit at the table just as much as you lot are – probably *more*, given that she’s got more decency than the lot of you put together.”

“This is an *internal* affair, Weasley, and it’s none of your business,” retorted Pansy. “Five points from Gryffindor, and I’ll make it twenty if you don’t clear out.”

“I don’t think so.”

Hannah Abbott, who’d been sitting close by, had arrived, coming to stand on Bridget’s other side. Just behind her were Neville, Harry, and Hermione.

“Five points to Gryffindor for contesting unjust authority,” Hannah said calmly, “and five points from *Slytherin* for misusing Prefect powers. Now I do believe that seat belongs to Bridget – so you two,” she shot Crabbe and Goyle a reproachful look, “should step aside.”

To the surprise of everyone, a handful of Slytherins sitting around Pansy immediately started yelling in disapproval.

“As if – ”

“ – tried to kill – ”

“ – Magicsnatcher – ”

“ – we don’t want her here!”

The Slytherins who were yelling only made up about a fourth of the table, but everyone else remained so stone-faced and quiet that it might as well have been the entire house. Millicent Bulstrode, who was sitting about a foot away, kept her gaze on her plate and stayed silent, even though her fists were clenched so tightly around her knife and fork that it was a wonder she hadn’t bent them in half.

Hannah looked horrified by the reaction. Pansy sneered at her.

“Just because you’re a Prefect, Abbott, doesn’t mean you can tell my house what to do,” she said smugly. “We don’t want that *Magicsnatching trollop* sitting with us – and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Daphne, who’d been standing behind Pansy, glanced from Hannah to Bridget, her face unreadable but very white. His eyes rippling with righteous anger, Neville came up to stand next to Hannah.

“Yes, there is,” he shot back fiercely. He turned to Bridget. “Come on, Bridget...you can come sit with us – ”

“No.”

Bridget stepped forward away from the others and faced Pansy with icy cold black eyes. The effect was intimidating enough that even Blaise Zabini gave a faint tremble, though he covered it up quickly.

“I’m sitting with my house,” Bridget said resolutely.

She moved to walk around Crabbe and Goyle, but they blocked her. She moved the other way, only to be stopped again; she feigned one way, but was blocked yet again when she tried to go the opposite way.

“Bridget – ” started Hannah.

“*No*,” said Bridget firmly.

Completely undeterred by Crabbe and Goyle’s obstruction, she stepped to the left, feigned right, and then continued to the left, grabbing hold of Crabbe’s shoulder. In an instant she’d hoisted herself up, bounding off the bench beside Crabbe onto the table and, stepping expertly around the plates on her toes, finally landed on the far end of the opposite bench by the wall with a *FLUMP*.

The observing Gryffindors and Hufflepuff all burst into applause. Pansy flushed with anger, and the other Slytherins sitting around Pansy started yelling again. Zabini even took out his wand threateningly, as if prepared to *force* Bridget to move, but who would stop him but Daphne, who shot out her arm and seized his wrist.

“Mind your temper, Blaise,” she said in a cool, level tone that could’ve put her father to shame. “Remember where we are – and the many *teachers* who might see.” Daphne indicated the table at the back of the hall with a quick, pointed glance. “We wouldn’t want to cause a scene...now *would* we?”

Her hand clenched around his wrist, her sharp nails digging sharply into his skin, and with a high-pitched yelp, Zabini withdrew his arm, clutching it in pain. Daphne then turned to Hannah and the others, her cold brown eyes narrowed.

“Although we might accept Jaheem in the meantime, we will *never* accept you lot sitting here,” she said icily. “So clear out before things get really nasty.”

Hannah and Daphne locked eyes, staring each other down for a minute; then Hannah nodded curtly, turning away and striding back up toward the Hufflepuff table. Daphne then shifted her gaze to Harry.

“Jaheem’s awfully lucky that her victim’s friends are so quick to defend her,” she said coolly. “Tell me...what color envelope should I use for Weasley’s get-well card? Red? Or perhaps blue?”

Crabbe and Goyle chortled stupidly. Ginny plunged her hand into her robes, ready to hex Daphne

into next Tuesday, but Harry caught sight of Bridget suddenly mouthing “*No!*” at them and abruptly grabbed Ginny’s arm. Ignoring Ginny’s affronted gaze, Harry looked from Bridget to up at Daphne, whose face was still unusually pale.

“She warned you that the teachers might see.”

“So? Clearly didn’t want to get hexed, now did she?”

“And she didn’t want you to get in trouble. She just couldn’t say so, being around Pansy and her lot, so she had to help in a roundabout way.”

“Help in a roundabout way”...was *that* what Daphne was doing?

Harry put on his best smirk.

“...Orange I reckon is more Ron’s color – I’m sure he’ll be flattered to know that you would deign to send a ‘blood traitor’ like him your best wishes. Who knows, he might even send a thank you card to your parents.”

Bridget grinned at Harry over Pansy’s shoulder, sending him a covert thumbs-up. Daphne flashed Harry a nasty glare, before turning her back with a scoff and returning to her place at the Slytherin table. With a significant look at the others, Harry headed back toward the Gryffindor table, and they followed along behind him.

“Harry,” Hermione said with a thoughtful frown, “just now – you with Daphne – ”

“I think I got her message, yeah,” said Harry. “She wanted to know what Ron’s favorite color was – I guess for a gift she plans to send him...”

Neville looked confused. “Wait – so that insult just now – ”

“Was her helping, in a roundabout way,” Harry finished, smiling at Ginny.

Ginny's brown eyes widened.

“*Slytherins just aren't that straight-forward,*” she recalled, as her mouth spread into a broad smile.

The Guild of Griffins

Kevin had done his best to tune out the arrival of the *Stormer's* MagicChef report. When people had started discussing it at the Hufflepuff table at breakfast, he quickly put on his best smile and coaxed his friends, Brendan and Katsuji, to head to Professor Flitwick's classroom early so they could practice before their test on the Summoning Charm. He didn't want to let on how much the article bothered him, and given that Katsuji was Muggle-born, Kevin didn't want to put him in a position where he'd be forced to listen to the *Stormer's* bogus theories.

After Charms Kevin and Brendan headed outside for Care of Magical Creatures, while Katsuji went to Arithmancy. When they met up again in the Great Hall for lunch, Kevin and Brendan were surprised to see Katsuji reading a copy of the scarlet-lettered *Stormer* report.

Brendan immediately strode up and snatched the paper right out of Katsuji's hand.

"What the *bloody* hell are you doing, reading that bunk?" he demanded, sounding almost accusing through his concern.

Katsuji tried to snatch it back, but Brendan held it out of his reach.

"Ugh – if we want to know what we're arguing against, we have to read what the other side is saying!" Katsuji shot back sharply, as he tried and failed once again to grab it.

"What they're saying is *trash*, pure and simple," Brendan scoffed. "No point in arguing with it – "

"There *is* if reasonable people are falling for it, which they are," Katsuji said plainly. "Sure, you can't change the blood purists' minds, but not all the people who read and believe the *Stormer* are blood purists – "

"Of *course* they are!" said Brendan incredulously. "If they're with the *Stormer* and its crew, then they believe Muggles are inherently inferior to wizards, which means they're just as bad as the Death Eaters themselves – "

"Brendan – "

“The lot of them can all just be packed up and shipped right off to Azkaban, if you ask me,” Brendan finished harshly. “It’d save the world a hell of a lot of trouble...”

“Brendan, your *father’s* in it!” Katsuji burst out at last.

Both Kevin and Brendan froze. Brendan’s face went very white.

“...*What...*?”

He immediately unfolded the paper and started scanning, his green eyes darting madly across the page.

Katsuji’s face crumpled up in guilt.

“...There’s this article about the Guild of Griffins – it’s this faction in the Wizengamot that believes that the boundary between the Muggle and Wizarding Worlds should be completely torn down – and about how their leader, Enrouge, has been pushing to create a private, all-Muggle army for the express purpose of defending the Ministry from perceived threats.”

“*What?*” said Kevin, his voice going very wispy and quiet in his shock.

Katsuji shook his head, clearly upset as well. “I know – it’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard – but people *believe* it. They even have statements from people at the Wizengamot confirming that Enrouge suggested on the floor of Wizengamot that the Ministry should draft Muggle soldiers in our fight against the Death Eaters! And it wasn’t just junior members either – there was a bit from Tamsin Applebee’s grandmother, and she’s been on the bench for twenty plus years...and...well...”

Katsuji faltered as his gaze returned to Brendan. Kevin glanced at Brendan out the corner of his eye; his friend had clearly found the article in question, as his short, round face had become as sickeningly gray as old porridge.

“Why would he *talk* to them?” he whispered, as his fists clutching the paper shook with rage. “Why would he even give that craphat Cuffe the time of *day*, when he knows what kind of delusions he dreams up?!”

Kevin reached out a hand and squeezed Brendan's shoulder. "There must've been a misunderstanding – maybe he didn't know who he was talking to –"

"He knew *damn* well who!" Brendan cut him off, his tone rippling with both fury and anguish. "'Enrouge has always been a dangerous extremist, and this outburst proves it,' said senior Wizengamot member Ulysses Halkirk. 'The Aurors may be employees of the Ministry of Magic, but they're part of an independent department. What Enrouge is suggesting involves forcibly drafting Muggles into service, regardless of how much damage it would do to the Statute of Secrecy and how much it would endanger our World! It's despotic, pure and simple!'" Halkirk also went on to thank the Stormer for reporting on Enrouge's radical views, which the Daily Prophet has been too timid to directly condemn."

Brendan ripped the paper in half, his fierce green eyes filling up with tears and his jaw clenching tightly. He looked like he wanted to punch something, so Kevin took a firm, but gentle hold of his wrist.

"Brendan, I'm sorry," Katsuji said quietly. "But it's like I said...what the Stormer's printing is suckering in ordinary people as well as monsters. You didn't read the *other* stuff they're reporting...like you know that word the Slytherins have been using lately?"

"Magicsnatcher?" recalled Kevin.

"Yeah. Apparently it's all because of this old blood theory. Because no one can figure out where Muggle-borns get their magic from, if it isn't from their parents, some pureblood supremacists have gotten it into their heads that Muggle-borns actually *steal* their magic from young witches and wizards before they can be properly trained."

Kevin's mouth fell open. "But – that's –"

"Asinine, I know," Katsuji muttered sourly. "But it's what they think. They even claim it's the reason why good Pureblood families can give birth to Squibs or just less magically talented children – because they played with Muggles as children and those Muggles stole their magic away from them."

Brendan tried to slam his fist on the table, but Kevin was able to steady his grip on his wrist enough to stop him.

“No *sane* person would believe that,” Brendan snarled.

“You’d think so,” said Katsuji patiently. “But the problem is how often that lie is written. In just this one paper, the ‘*Magicsnatcher*’ theory was referenced as though it were fact over *ten times*. After reading it over and over like it’s fact, with no one questioning or discussing it anywhere else...I daresay *anyone* would start to believe it, after a while. And when it’s the only paper that publishes certain stories, like the one about Ida Cromwell beating up Burke at the Ministry...well, people could start to rely on it as their best source of information, even if it’s flawed. And sooner or later...well, how much of what the *Stormer*’s writing *is* the truth?”

“*None of it!*” Brendan shot back furiously. His tear-filled, furious eyes seemed almost mad. “*None* of it is true! I don’t believe a *word* of it!”

“Brendan – ” Katsuji started weakly, but Brendan didn’t want to hear it. Without another word, he stormed away from the Hufflepuff table and out of the Hall.

Katsuji turned to Kevin helplessly.

“...I don’t *want* them to be right, you know,” he said quietly. “You *know* I don’t.”

Kevin nodded mutely.

“I mean – the thought of tearing down the wall between worlds?” Katsuji pressed on. “It *sounds* nice – but I’m sorry, I just think it’d run into a lot of problems. For one, who’d be in charge – the Minister of Magic or the Prime Minister? You’d have to choose one or the other, and there’d be no way to make it fair. Not to mention how much the Muggles would freak out if they learned the truth...”

Kevin gazed at Katsuji thoughtfully as his friend looked down at the floor, his face turning very despondent.

Katsuji knew perhaps better than anyone how badly a Muggle could react to the truth. Katsuji’s magical outbursts as a child had been treated as deliberate and belligerent misbehavior by his parents, and so Katsuji was frequently punished for those “accidents.” When he’d been accepted to Hogwarts, Mr. and Mrs. Yamazaki rejected the invitation, as Katsuji wouldn’t be able to go to the Muggle schools they wanted him to and take on the family business as they’d hoped. Fortunately

Professor McGonagall gave them a stern talking to, but even now Katsuji stayed at Hogwarts during every holiday break he could so as to avoid being at home.

Biting the inside of his lip, Kevin considered his response carefully. Then at last, he reached out, placed a hand on top of Katsuji's on the table, and gave him his best encouraging smile.

"...There might be no simple answer...but fortunately we don't *have* to figure it all out. All we can really do right now is just support each other the best we can, right?"

Kevin patted Katsuji's hand once and then added more brightly, "Now come on – let's get something in our bellies before our next class, okay?"

Katsuji smiled slightly in return. "Okay."

Kevin and Katsuji headed to Transfiguration, hoping to find Brendan there when they arrived. Unfortunately he seemed to have disappeared; Kevin tried not to look too concerned by his absence.

On the way out of the classroom, Kevin and Katsuji were stopped by a voice behind them.

"Kevin!"

Kevin turned to see Astoria and Arjuna striding up to them.

"Hi," he greeted brightly. As soon as the word had left his lips, though, he noticed how much less cheerful Astoria and Arjuna looked.

"Kevin, Daphne said something about your friend's father being mentioned in the *Stormer*," Astoria said urgently.

"We know," Kevin cut her off quietly. His face had become much more somber. "We found out at lunch."

Astoria's shoulders slackened slightly; she'd clearly been worried about their reactions.

"I guess that explains why Halkirk wasn't in class," Arjuna murmured grimly.

Katsuji nodded, looking away uncomfortably. As the four set off down the hall together, Arjuna glanced from Katsuji to Kevin, her black eyes narrowing slightly.

"Cho's been rather quiet too," she said lowly, "though from what I gather, it's for the opposite reason."

"What do you mean?" Kevin asked, his eyebrows furrowing slightly.

"Cho's father is friends with some of the people who formed the Guild of Griffins," Arjuna explained, "you know, the group Adrian Enrouge is with? Cho thinks there must have been a misunderstanding, as the Guilders have said they want to bring the worlds together in peace and harmony, but...well, there's just no way to know, is there, if the *Prophet* won't report it..."

"We asked Professor Burbage about it in class, though, and she had to admit that Enrouge is a little unstable," said Astoria. "She said that Enrouge has always been very interested in Muggle weapons...she thinks he might want to use the Muggle military against the Death Eaters – maybe use some of their more powerful weapons to fight them..."

Katsuji looked horrified. "You mean like the atomic bomb?"

"Yeah, but don't worry, no one in their right *mind* would support that," Arjuna said quickly. "I mean, it's like Papa says – people worry about their own sphere of the world – and a weapon like that would *more* than infringe on everyone's spheres just a touch, right?"

Kevin's stomach sank. "...So it's possible the *Stormer* was telling the truth after all?"

"It looks like it," Astoria confirmed sadly.

Noticing the others' hopeless faces, Arjuna turned to them with new ferocity in her eyes.

“What the *Stormer* said doesn’t matter,” she said firmly. “None of it does. No matter what tiny shreds of truth might crop up in its articles from time to time, its goal is still the same – to divide us...and even if the Guilders *are* suggesting this terrible thing, that doesn’t make the *Stormer* and its blood purity nonsense any less awful and untrue!”

Arjuna’s confidence brought the color back to Kevin’s cheeks.

“Right,” he agreed optimistically. “And honestly, who says we *have* to support the Guilders, just because they hate Cuffe, or support Cuffe just because he hates the Guilders? I think they’re *both* wrong – I’m sure everyone else knows that as well – ”

Kevin had been about to say something else, but just as he strode past a particular hallway he saw a pair of slightly older wizards confronting each other in the far corner.

Thinking it might be a fight but unsure if they should step in, Kevin abruptly flung his arm out in front of the others, forcing them to back up and hide along the wall so they couldn’t be seen.

“Kevin – ?” started Astoria, but Kevin quickly turned to her, his pointer finger over his lips in a silencing gesture.

“I know Bridget wasn’t the only one down there that night,” a familiar voice spat, “and I know she’s not the sort to buy poisons in Knockturn Alley.”

“Whatever you’re *insinuating*, Potter, just spit it out,” said a drawling voice. “I’m in no mood for games.”

“I know you poisoned Ron, Malfoy!”

Astoria, Arjuna, Katsuji, and Kevin all stared at each other, visibly stricken.

Malfoy didn’t reply at first. When he did, his voice was so quiet they could barely hear it.

“...You *know* that, do you?”

There was another long pause. Then Malfoy said, quieter still,

“Then why don’t you just...*prove* it?”

The silence that followed was almost agonizing. It dragged on so long that Astoria couldn’t prevent herself from peeking around the corner.

Malfoy and Harry were right up in each other’s faces. Harry was facing away from Astoria, so Malfoy’s pale, pointed face was the more visible of the two, and honestly, the boy who had once been Slytherin’s Seeker looked positively ill. There were horrible dark bags under his eyes and his cheeks looked noticeably sallow. His pale complexion was tinted with gray, with no hint of healthy color, and all of the cruel charisma that was so familiar to his features was gone. Astoria thought to herself that she would never have recognized this hollow shell of a boy as the horrid brat who had pushed her into a punch bowl at a Ministry Christmas party when she was eight, had Harry not addressed him by his name.

Malfoy’s gray eyes blazed as they bore into Harry’s green ones, but when his mouth twisted upward in something like a smirk, it only served to make his expression look more painful...like a cat that had been hit by a car and was left dying at the side of a road...

“...You can’t, can you?” Malfoy whispered.

His smirk fading, he faced Harry with a gaze so full of hate it made him look half mad.

“If you had proof, then you would’ve turned me into Dumbledore – but you *don’t*, because the proof isn’t there. I didn’t lay a *finger* on those bottles. Whatever you think you know about me, Potter...you don’t know a damn thing.”

His expression grew colder, number, as he shoved his way past Harry, knocking his shoulder against his as he went. Astoria shrank back and hid herself again, expecting Malfoy to round the corner any second –

“An innocent man doesn’t stiffen like a *stray cat* when he gets confronted,” Harry said abruptly.

The sound of Malfoy's footsteps came to an abrupt halt. An echoing, anxiety-inducing silence once again rippled down the hall. Then, after a long, tense moment, Malfoy strode out of the hall, barreling right past the group of fourth-years without even having seen them.

As he left, however, Astoria couldn't help but notice how pale and scared his face looked, and for the first time in her life, she found herself wondering if Draco Malfoy, who for as long as she could remember had been nothing but a petty, merciless bully, had more demons than he let on.

The Lemon Juice Spy

Upon learning what the *Stormer*'s report contained, the Creevey brothers had made it their personal mission to track down as many copies of it as they could and destroy them. Colin had been angry and upset enough when Uric Cuffe's anti-Muggle-born writings made it into the *Daily Prophet*, so reading his unfiltered, disgusting opinion and knowing it was becoming more acceptable to people by the day was enough to infuriate him. Dennis's anger had been colder and more intense – from where he stood, Cuffe had gone too far when he deliberately targeted Bridget and had now become an active threat to be dealt with.

At lunchtime Colin and Dennis met at the Gryffindor table to discuss their progress.

"I tracked down about eighteen copies," said Colin in irritation. "I was able to burn most of them, though Flitwick came by before I could force Romilda Vane to give me her copy."

He neglected to mention how Flitwick's arrival might have also saved him from getting a Stinging Jinx to the face.

"Only got eight so far, but I overheard one of the Slytherins muttering about where her friend could get a copy," said Dennis with a slight smirk. "I reckon I can just pay a little visit there after Herbology and burn the lot."

It was sort of funny how, even after all these years, the two boys had hardly changed. Yes, perhaps they'd both gotten a little taller (though Colin was still barely a head taller than Dennis despite the two year age gap), and perhaps Colin's hair had only gotten blonder while Dennis's hair had stayed mousy brown, but they still hunched in toward each other and talked quickly and enthusiastically amongst themselves like they were still back in grade school – like it was still just the two of them against the world.

Colin opened up his copy of the *Daily Prophet* and continued reading.

"Ugh, they put an apostrophe in '*it's*' when it's supposed to be possessive," he scoffed. "Dennis, gimme your quill, will you?"

Having noticed the sourness in Colin's face before he'd even spoken, Dennis had taken out the quill in anticipation of the request, and so Colin could immediately get to work scribbling his corrections. Most people would likely have told Colin that good grammar was less important than

the sentiment behind the articles, but Dennis knew his brother well enough to never suggest that.

“Anything decent today?” Dennis asked lightly.

Colin looked up.

“...Well, Goodfellow’s stuff’s good, as always. He put in a short piece about Scrimgeour’s newest security measures for the Ministry and even though he had to flatter him, he was still able to get across how extreme they are – said that Scrimgeour’s measures could give the Gringotts goblins a run for their money – ”

Dennis snorted in amusement. “Well, I s’pose that old prat Scrimgeour looks a *touch* like a goblin already...”

The owls had started flapping overhead. A good flock of them headed over toward the Slytherin table, and Colin watched them drop a stack of letters off in front of Bridget. His dark eyes narrowed.

“Bridget’s gotten more post,” he muttered.

Dennis glanced over his shoulder at the Slytherin table, his face turning more solemn. “...More hate mail in response to the *Stormer*’s bunk, you think?”

“Yeah,” Colin said crossly. His cheeks started to flush angrily. “It’s just disgusting, the sort of stuff they’ve been saying – claiming she was trying to take *revenge* for Ron having beaten her – that she stole magic from some really talented Pureblood as a kid in order to get here! Apparently the Slytherins have even been trying to force her not to sit at their table, because they don’t want anything to do with her – ”

“It’s right rotten,” agreed Dennis vehemently, his righteous anger making his tone quieter in contrast to his brother, whose volume tended to increase when he was mad. “Do you reckon we could convince Dumbledore to let her room with us Gryffindors for a while? Could protect her from all of this mess – ”

“I doubt it,” Colin said begrudgingly. “Even if Dumbledore said yes, I doubt *Bridget* would – too proud to run away, I’d say – ”

“S’pose we can’t blame her for that, eh?”

It was as the two brothers talked amongst themselves that an owl flopped down between them and dropped a letter onto Dennis’s plate. The younger Creevey picked it up – it was in a distinctive mint green envelope addressed in emerald green ink, though the address was cut off in the corner with an intrusive purple “OPS” stamp, confirming that it had been examined and approved by the Ministry of Magic’s new Owl Post Security board.

Colin and Dennis Creevey

Gryffindor House

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Dennis immediately ripped it open. It was a card with the words “*Thank you!*” enchanted to dance across the front in big, overly excitable blue and red letters. When he opened it, a strange lemony smell that reminded him of cleaning supplies touched his nose, and he found a little note on the inside.

Thanks for helping out with my article! I couldn’t write the amazing things I do without you.

Terence Higgs Goodfellow

“It’s from Goodfellow,” said Dennis, “thanking us for our input for his MagicChef report.”

Colin raised his eyebrows. “...Well, that’s nice of him, I suppose.”

He glanced around. A few other mint green envelopes had been deposited around the tables to other students – Arjuna, Cho, Eddie Carmichael, Susan Bones, Harry, and Hermione.

“Guess he’s sent a couple of ‘em – though I notice Pansy Parkinson and Hector Summerby didn’t get one,” Colin said smugly. “Didn’t like *their* sentiments, I s’pose...”

Dennis’s dark eyes ran over the card thoughtfully.

“Colin,” he said slowly, “can you give me some water? Conjure it up with your wand?”

Faintly surprised, Colin did as his brother requested, tapping Dennis’s goblet with his wand and filling it with water with the charm “*Aquamenti*.” Dennis then dipped his fingers in it and started brushing them against the card.

Colin’s eyes lit up.

“Do you think there’s a secret message?” he asked in a hushed, excited voice.

“Well, remember, I brought up how we used to use invisible ink,” Dennis whispered back eagerly, “how he should write the articles he wants inside the *Daily Prophet* with it, so we can read what’s *really* going on – maybe he ran with the idea – ”

As Dennis trailed his wet fingers along the card, however, nothing appeared. Undeterred, Colin plunged his hand into his schoolbag and fetched out his bright red Revealer eraser.

“Here, maybe he used an enchantment instead! He is wizard-born, after all...”

He started frantically rubbing the edge of the Revealer up against both sides of the card. Alas, like before, nothing happened.

Both Creevey brothers looked disappointed.

“Guess it was too much to hope for,” Colin said gloomily.

Dennis, however, could not quite let go of his original theory. Something didn’t add up about the cards – sure, perhaps Goodfellow had only sent them to the people he’d actually *liked* talking to as opposed to everyone he’d interviewed, but why would he put in so much work just to send them such impersonal, crisp little notes?

So Dennis held onto the card, resolving to do more tests later as he headed off for Herbology. The other third year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs were already there by the time he arrived – he stopped outside the door of Greenhouse Three, just behind Owen and his friend Eleanor Bradstone.

“Hi, Dennis,” Owen greeted pleasantly.

“Hey, Owen,” answered Dennis.

The two had never been *friends* per se, but Owen was amiable enough of a person that Dennis didn't mind the familiarity. Unlike Dennis, Owen was the sort of person who could make friends easily. Perhaps it was the laidback, good-natured air he let off, or perhaps it was just his comfort dealing with both Muggle and Wizard technology thanks to his mixed ancestry, but he'd always been able to get along with a wide array of people, whether Purebloods like Hector Summerby or Muggle-borns like Eleanor. It made Dennis feel a bit jealous, considering that the Creevey brothers had never had as easy of a time of making friends, but Dennis just couldn't make himself dislike Owen. The Hufflepuff's amiability just rubbed off too much on him for Dennis to really resent him.

Eleanor smiled at Dennis, and he avoided her eyes with a faint blush. She had always been quite pretty; she'd started wearing her black hair in a cute pixie cut that year, but it only served to better frame her pale face and small black eyes. Plus she was about the only thing that kept Dennis awake in History of Magic – she was the only student who ever raised her hand to ask questions in that class.

Owen noted the mint green envelope still clutched in Dennis's hand and smiled slightly.

“Goodfellow wrote to you too, huh?” he asked.

Dennis blinked. “You got one?”

“Yeah – he asked some questions about Hannah, for the article. It was nice of him to send cards, wasn't it? Don't reckon that bat Rita Skeeter ever did that for any of *her* sources...”

“Yeah...” Dennis replied, though he couldn't help but let his tone drift off into nothingness as he once again considered Goodfellow's sparse note.

Professor Sprout arrived at that moment, looking chipper as she shuffled past her students to unlock the door and let them in. Dennis settled down in the back row as always – Owen and Eleanor took a station just to the left of him. Sprout started her lecture about Puffapods, but Dennis couldn't help but let his attention drift away. He covertly snuck the card back out of its envelope and peeked at it

again under the table.

The Hogwarts post was being monitored – Dennis knew that full well. Just the other day he'd overheard Professors McGonagall and Snape talking about how half of Bridget's mail had been destroyed since they had come full of nasty hexes, poisons, and non-Ministry-approved insults. The OPS had even started destroying packages that came with any personalized enchantments (unless they were performed and verified by a sanctioned vendor like Zonko's) in an attempt to deter the flood of jinxed notes and poisoned gifts. Why go through all of that potential scrutiny just to be polite? And besides, Goodfellow had been in *Slytherin* – he'd been very amiable, but he was still a Slytherin. And didn't Slytherins idolize cleverness? So it wouldn't be out of character for him to try to sneakily subvert the Owl Post Security board's strict rules, right...?

"It's weird, isn't it?"

Dennis jumped, looking up quickly. Owen was facing the board, pretending to pay attention to Sprout's lecture, but he continued to talk under his breath just loud enough for Dennis to hear him.

"The note was so short. Goodfellow doesn't seem like the kind of guy to...be that *brief*, you know?"

Dennis felt an exhilarating wave of validation wash over him.

"I know," he muttered back, "I mean, he and Colin and I, we were talking for almost twenty minutes, about lots of stuff..."

Owen nodded.

"I thought maybe he was using some sort of code...you know, to try to duck the OPS," he whispered, his voice quite a bit slower than Dennis's frenetic cadence. "I got a badge for breaking codes in Hippogriff Scouts...and I thought Goodfellow would probably be sharp enough to try it. But I couldn't find anything. I mean, even in codes, you need a bit more to work with –"

"I was thinking that it could be invisible ink," Dennis cut him off. "Colin and I were telling him about it, when he visited – we used to use it a lot as kids, you see – send notes to each other that no one else could read and splash a bit of water on them to make the ink appear – only, we tried both water and a Revealer, and they didn't work..."

Eleanor's small black eyes lit up.

"Owen," she whispered excitedly, "the lemon smell on the card – I bet Goodfellow used lemon juice!"

Both Owen and Dennis looked confused.

"Lemon juice – like the German lemon juice spies, you know?" Eleanor prompted.

"Afraid not, Elle," Owen said amusedly. "We're not history buffs like you, remember?"

Eleanor looked faintly impatient, but she kept the emotion in her voice and eyes very muted – she was not the sort to get overly animated. It made her look almost deadpan.

"During World War I the British army – the Muggle one, I mean – had been censoring a lot of mail," she explained lowly. "I have a couple of books about the War at home. There were these German spies who'd been hiding out here and used this old formula for invisible ink that used lemon juice for their messages – it was so basic that the British Secret Service caught them right fast and sent them to the Tower for it, but I'd bet most wizards wouldn't know about it. All you have to do is put a letter marked with lemon juice over a flame, and you'll reveal the message."

Dennis's entire face lit up. "Brilliant!"

Owen was smiling broadly too. "Dennis, let's meet after class...then we can test it."

Once Herbology was over, the three broke away from their respective housemates and headed off together toward the Lake. Once they'd settled themselves under a large tree, they peeked around for any possible observers and, once they determined the coast was clear, Dennis took out the card and his wand.

"Incendio!"

Unfortunately his Fire-Summoning Spell was too powerful – in an instant, the card had caught fire. Dennis dropped it with a yelp, but fortunately it had been completely burnt to cinders by the time it

reached the ground.

“Good thing we have a back-up,” said Owen calmly, smiling slightly. “Let me try this time – I think I can manage it.”

Dennis nodded sheepishly. Owen had always been better at Charms than he had.

Owen took out his own lemon-scented card, holding his wand significantly farther away from the back of the card than Dennis had.

“Incendio.”

His wand burst into a much more controlled flame. Very carefully, he ran the flame-touched wand back and forth over the back of the card.

“Something’s appearing,” he said excitedly.

Dennis and Eleanor peeked over his shoulder.

“Guy – *Guild*,” Dennis read each word slowly as it appeared, “*accusations...true. Ministry... shadow – shadowing...Guilders. OPS...tight – tightens...on...Ministry...Hogwarts...Di – Diagon...and...Mungo’s.*”

Owen gave a visible start. “St. Mungo’s? I didn’t know they were regulating St. Mungo’s mail too...”

Eleanor immediately looked concerned. “Owen, the package you sent...”

Owen glanced at Dennis, his face more overtly worried than Eleanor’s. “I sent Ron my own box of handmade Fizzing Whizbees a few days ago...I thought they might cheer him up...”

“The OPS has been destroying all packages with hand-done enchantments,” Dennis recalled, visibly upset. “So Ron wouldn’t have gotten your present!”

“And if any of Ron’s other friends sent anything with personalized magic on it, he probably wouldn’t have gotten those either,” said Eleanor sadly.

Owen’s eyes narrowed slightly, becoming much more serious as he handed his copy of Goodfellow’s card to Dennis.

“Tell your brother to meet the rest of the Cooking Club down in the kitchens tonight,” he said. “I’ll talk to the others. We need to come up with something, if we want Ron to get everything we send him.”

Dennis nodded firmly. “I’ll tell Harry, Hermione, and Ginny too – they ought to know.”

That evening after dinner, Colin came down to the kitchens, Goodfellow’s card in hand. As he approached the portrait, he came across Cho.

“Hey, Cho,” he said, trying to smile despite the anxiety he felt.

Cho attempted a weak smile in return. “Hi, Colin.”

She seemed a little paler than usual. Colin had heard something about Cho’s father and the Guild and had a feeling he knew why.

“Is your father okay?” he asked. “I mean, I know the mail’s watched and he probably can’t say much, but...”

He didn’t really know how to finish, so his sentence stagnated. Cho seemed to appreciate the sympathy, though.

“Yes, he’s all right,” she said softly. “I got a letter from him this morning. He didn’t say anything about the Guild – probably couldn’t – but he seemed chipper enough.”

Despite this, her black eyes still drifted off toward the ground. Colin impulsively reached a hand

out and patted her arm reassuringly.

“I’m sure he’ll be okay!” he told her kindly, his tone once again just as fast as his brain was moving. “I mean, you’re awful smart, so I’m sure he is too – and let’s be honest, the Ministry seems to have a shortage of brains – I mean, last year a bunch of fifth year students bust into Department of Mysteries all on their own, right?”

“My father and mother *work* for the Ministry,” Cho said amusedly.

Colin opened his mouth to awkwardly apologize, but Cho stopped him.

“Thank you,” she said, her lips touched with a soft, sincere smile.

They approached the portrait of the fruit bowl. Cho extended a hand, tickled the pear, and the portrait swung open, allowing them entrance. When they entered the kitchens, they found most of the others waiting for them – Hannah, Millicent, Astoria, Arjuna, Kevin, Bridget, Owen, and Rose had all settled themselves around the kitchen, though unlike usual none of them had taken out any cooking supplies.

“Cho! Colin!” said Hannah. She walked right up to them, putting a hand on each of their shoulders and squeezing. “Glad you could make it.”

Colin glanced around to the others, his anxiety on his face. “So you all heard about Goodfellow’s message?”

“I told them,” said Owen, nodding.

“I guess it makes sense that if they tightened security here, they’d also do it at St. Mungo’s,” said Arjuna sensibly, though she didn’t seem particularly pleased. “I mean, it’s tightened here because of Ron getting poisoned, and now Ron’s over there.”

Bridget scowled. “Even if the idea made any sense, the security itself is nonsense. My gift didn’t have magic in it, but that post belongs to its *recipient*, no one else. Ron deserves his privacy – all of us do.”

Cho nodded. “I understand the desire to protect people – I’ve heard that a lot of dangerous packages have gotten filtered out by the OPS before they could reach the school, so there have been some benefits...but they’re clearly throwing out the good along with the bad.”

The last member of the group – Daphne – finally arrived. She had two large leather-bound books under her arm, one orange and one white.

“Evening, everyone,” she greeted the others coolly.

Surprisingly her face was not the least bit concerned; instead her lips were curled up in the faintest of satisfied, refined smirks.

“As luck would have it,” Daphne said breezily, “I have a solution.”

Daphne's Gift

Ron received several more packages, cards, and letters over the course of the week. A few of them, like Colin's and Cho's, bore the distinctive old-sock-like smell that indicated they'd been copied, but some of them, like Rose's and Seamus's, were innocent enough that they got through unscathed. Ginny, Harry, and Hermione's birthday presents had also arrived; sadly Ron wouldn't be able to use his new Quidditch gloves until he got back to Hogwarts, but his mother helped him put on his new bright orange Chudley Cannons scarf and Jengu had been kind enough to help him look over some of the new recipes in the huge cookbook Hermione had sent. Some food dishes also made it through safely; Hannah had sent Ron a delicious blackberry pie, while Arjuna had sent a package of deep-fried, crispy snacks stuffed with minced meat that she called lukhmis. Mrs. Weasley even tried one, and was thoroughly charmed by it.

The present that made Ron happiest, though, was a bouquet of white flowers with a letter tucked inside.

Dear Ron,

I know a lot of the others are baking things for you, but under the circumstances I knew I had to send you these instead. Once a girl from my ballet class got in a car accident, and she and her dad both ended up in the hospital with broken limbs. My mum took me to the flower shop and we picked out the biggest, prettiest bouquets of chrysanthemums we could find to put next to their beds, to cheer up their hospital rooms. Mum always sends chrysanthemums whenever any of her friends are going through something difficult; she says they mean optimism.

When you first got poisoned, it felt like I was in an awful nightmare. I couldn't have been more relieved when I learned you were going to be all right. I know you're still going to be in the hospital for a while, but the fact that you're alive is enough for me, at least for now. Still, I'm sure it sucks being in there, so I hope this helps.

Thank you for believing me. So many people don't, but the fact that you're not one of them comforts me more than anything else. Thank you for your friendship, and I hope you can send a letter back soon, even if you can't write it yourself.

Love,

Bridget

The bouquet now sat on his bedside table next to the get-well cards from Neville, Lavender, Millicent, Dennis, Dean, Seamus, Luna, Kevin, Astoria, and Cho. Thanks to the healing potions he'd taken over the last week, he could now shift himself in bed enough to look at them, even though he didn't have the dexterity needed to pick any of them up yet, and that had helped.

As the week came to a close, there was a change in Jengu. He suddenly seemed distracted and worried, and he kept looking over his shoulder and forgetting the schedule for Ron's healing

potions. When Ron had tried asking him about it, Jengu had been evasive.

“It’s nothing for you to worry about, Ron,” he said with a slightly strained smile. “All you need to worry about right now is getting better – not my personal problems.”

The Ministry had been placing tighter security around the wards as of late. According to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, there was now an Auror who monitored the halls, beadily observing all of the guests and staff members as they migrated around St. Mungo’s. Apparently the Auror department had even originally wanted to allow their agents to patrol the medical wards at night, but the Chief Healer, Augusta Feverfew, had put her foot down and ordered them to leave the patients be.

‘Maybe that Auror is what’s got Jengu spooked,’ Ron thought. ‘I’m sure anybody would be a little unsettled by that kind of scrutiny.’

That weekend Harry, Hermione, and Ginny used the Floo Network to come for a visit. When they entered, Hermione was carrying a weird orange book under her arm.

“Whatcha reading, Hermione?” Ron asked casually.

“Oh...just one of my old favorites,” Hermione answered pleasantly.

She glanced over her shoulder cautiously. The rest of the ward had emptied out over the last week, but there were a handful of Healers just outside the open door to the ward. Ginny, successfully feigning casualness, sidled over to the door and closed it.

“*Muffliato*,” Harry whispered, pointing his wand at the door.

Ron raised an eyebrow at the three curiously. Harry grinned.

“We just don’t want anyone to overhear,” he said lowly. “We promised to make sure no one could potentially eavesdrop on us by noon. At least the ward’s empty, which makes it easier – we thought we might have to set off a Decoy Detonator.”

“Why?” asked Ron with a frown. “Promised who?”

“We’ll explain later,” said Hermione, her face turning more concerned as she asked, “How are you feeling?”

Ron gave a weak shrug. “Better, I s’pose...still can hardly move, but at least I can sit up and such. Wish I could scratch my nose when I want to, though. How’s the team looking?”

“Cormac’s...*passable*,” Harry said halfheartedly.

“He’s a complete twat,” scoffed Ginny.

“He’s a decent enough player,” Harry explained, “but his attitude is pretty shoddy.”

“He kept puffing himself up and flirting with Demelza and me the entire practice,” said Ginny scornfully. “I wanted to cast a Bat Bogey Hex on him, but fortunately he got hit in the face with a Bludger, so I didn’t have to.”

Harry couldn’t quite keep the smile off his face at the memory either. “Believe me, we’ll all be really glad to have you back.”

Ron smiled. “I’ll be glad to be back too.”

Out the corner of his eye, he noticed Jengu walk past the window, glancing over his shoulder nervously. Ron frowned.

“...Hey, did you guys see that Auror on the way in?” asked Ron.

“That big ugly one with the humorless face?” Ginny said darkly. “Yeah – looked like a human vulture. Kept sweeping around, glaring at everyone suspiciously...”

“He was like Filch except worse,” agreed Harry. “As we went through security, it felt like he was trying to smell misbehavior on our shoulders, he was so close.”

“I reckon he’s there because of the Guild of Griffins,” whispered Hermione.

“The what?” said Ron.

Hermione and Ginny quickly explained what they knew, including the secret message Goodfellow had sneaked in.

“...So now apparently the Ministry’s tailing any and all members,” said Hermione. “I’ll bet they’re trying to find other members too, ones they don’t know about.”

Ron’s stomach squirmed. Jengu had expressed sympathies for Enrouge’s position that one time... but he’d never said anything about wanting to form a private Muggle army to fight the Death Eaters! Jengu didn’t seem like the type to go along with something so stupid. Was it a misunderstanding? Was Jengu not really a member of the group, but had just liked some of their ideas?

Harry’s green eyes narrowed slightly. “It’s ridiculous. Sure, maybe Enrouge suggested something stupid, but the Death Eaters are *killing* people. *That’s* what the Ministry should be worrying about, not trying to hunt down these Guilders...”

“Harry,” Ginny stopped him abruptly.

She nodded to the clock. It was almost noon.

“Check the door,” Harry told her.

Ginny darted over to the other side of the doorway, covertly watching for anyone outside who might try to enter.

“It’s clear.”

Ron looked from Harry to Ginny, confused. “...What...?”

Hermione took his hand. Ron couldn't feel any sort of warmth from the action, but at least he could vaguely sense she was holding it this time.

"We'll explain in a minute," she murmured gently.

The clock counted down to noon – five seconds – four – three – two –

CRACK.

A familiar house elf abruptly appeared in the center of the ward floor, dressed in his most obnoxious maroon-colored socks and a new red hat and carrying an orange book identical in appearance to the one Hermione was carrying.

"*Dobby?*" Ron choked in surprise.

"*Master Weasley!*" Dobby said brightly. "So good to see you!"

The little elf thrust both of his tiny arms around Ron's legs under the sheets, squeezing them tight in his best attempt at a hug. Ron grinned.

"Good to see you too, Dobby...but what...?"

"*In a minute,*" Hermione reiterated softly.

She passed Dobby the orange book she'd been holding, and Dobby gave her his identical copy in return. Then, with a little bounce, the house elf leapt back down to the floor.

"Get well soon, Master Weasley!" said Dobby, waving a long-fingered hand in a cheerful goodbye.

With that, he disappeared with another *CRACK*.

Ginny left her place by the door, grinning from ear to ear, as she returned to Ron's bedside.

"Go ahead and open the book, Ron," she said eagerly.

Hermione placed the orange leather book in his lap. Ron, biting his lip, put his hand awkwardly on the cover, flapping it around until he could slide his digits under the orange leather and slap the book open.

The name "*Ronald Bilius Weasley*" was written into the interior cover, and on the first page was a letter written in flawlessly beautiful penmanship.

Dear Ron,

This is a handcrafted Kransimir scrapbook. Like a two-way mirror, it allows two people to talk back and forth with each other, only through the written word instead of face-to-face. Anything written, drawn, pasted, or taped into either scrapbook will instantly appear in the other. It also includes the additional privacy measure that only the owner(s) whose full name is written into the cover can open and read its contents. Once it's closed, if anyone else opens it, all they will see are some generic pictures Colin has taped in for you. As of yet, this kind of scrapbook is not on the market, as its creator is still saving up for his own workshop back in Bulgaria, so no one else will have one or know how it works. He's working on prototypes for more advanced models that would allow multiple people to contact each other through them, but for now, I suppose this will do. Our copy will stay in the kitchens, so that any member of the Cooking Club can access it. Still, for security, we'll have to keep the book's existence purely on a need-to-know basis, so I'm afraid I'm just keeping your sister, Potter, and Granger in the fold.

Even though I'm sure you won't be able to write back yet, I expect receiving letters and pictures will still be of some comfort. Be strong: you will get through this, and until you do, imagine the great triumph you'll feel upon your return to Hogwarts!

Love from

Daphne

Ron looked up at the others, stunned. "...Wait, so...anything you write in this –"

"– Will appear immediately and be completely private," finished Ginny in satisfaction. "We brought a fake copy filled with Colin's pictures with us so that everyone would '*see the book arrive*,' so the Healers won't ask where you got it and get suspicious. As far as anyone else will know, it'll just be a cute little scrapbook without any magic in it whatsoever!"

Hermione squeezed Ron's hand, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Go on, turn the page!"

Ron once again slipped his clumsily stiff hand under the page with some difficulty and flipped it over.

The page was filled with shorter postscripts.

We miss you so much, Ron! It'll be so much fun to have you in the kitchens again.

Love,

Hannah

You can do it, Ron! We believe in you!

Kevin

Stay strong, Ron! If anyone can get through this, it's you.

Astoria

PENGUINS! Sorry, I wanted to make you laugh – hope it worked!!

xoxoxo

Rose

See you soon, Weasley.

Millicent B

I know being stuck in bed is no fun at all, but this should hopefully brighten up your days some. Get well soon!

Owen

Get well soon, Ron! I promise I'll tape in a new picture every single day until you get back!!

Cheers!

Ron,

I can't imagine the discomfort and pain you're going through. I've only ever been to St. Mungo's once after accidentally setting my room on fire when I was little, and the experience at St. Mungo's was easily the worst part, as it was the first and only time I've ever seen my father cry. It's such a barren, unhappy place, which couldn't be a worse prison for such a generous and cheerful person as you. But if there's one thing I learned while watching you in the MagicChef competition, it is that no chains can hold you, however strong and heavy they might be.

Fight on, Ron, and don't give up! One can only really fail when one stops trying.

Arjuna

Everyone's said it all already, so here's a quick drawing for you! Hope you like it, and hang in there.

Love,

Cho

Ron –

Hope the flowers reached you, but in case they didn't, let me just say thank you for believing in me. I hope you know how much that means to me, and I hope you know how much your friendship means, too. There's this old saying about how you're braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think...if you were a quote, Ron, you'd definitely be that one.

Thank you,

Bridget

Cho's note was embellished with a small sketch depicting a grinning Ron with a cute little crown on his head and a pair of tiny dragon wings sprouting out of his back.

By the time Ron had finished reading all the notes, he felt his eyes filling up with tears, though he quickly forced them back. Hermione, Harry, and Ginny all smiled as they watched him reread the notes several times; Harry came over to Ron's other side, sat down on the bed, and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

Then, to everyone's surprise, as they sat there together, they noticed words starting to appear, little by little, on the open opposite page.

Hi, Ron!

Just got the fake book back! I can't believe that Daphne's idea really worked!! Not that she isn't brilliant, but you know...

I'm enclosing an editorial that appeared in the Prophet this morning...as soon as I read it I knew you and the others just had to see it!

We'll write back more later!

Colin

A few moments later, several *Daily Prophet* clippings pasted together so that the letter could be read seamlessly appeared underneath the note.

To the readers of the Daily Prophet,

I have both written and spoken publicly many times in the past as a politician, as a resource, and as an enthusiastic author. But today, I write to all of you solely as a citizen of the Wizarding World and as a grandmother of two sweet little boys.

For the last thirty years, I have watched the Wizarding World evolve in ways I could never have imagined possible. When I was a little girl, my parents were captivated by news of Grindelwald's reign of terror raging throughout Eastern Europe. I remember how they would spout off the numbers of Muggle casualties, and how much the numbers would blur. In the span of one day it'd be 50, then 35, and then 65, and even then it was all still just guesswork. Even now, most numbers in the assembled lists of Grindelwald's Muggle casualties are estimations more than anything else – mostly because, back then, it was seen as more important to help wizards identify their deceased family members, as Muggles couldn't be told the real rationale behind their relatives' demise. I remember as a child being forbidden to play at the local playground because so many Muggle children liked to go there...though my brother and I still used to sneak out from time to time, under our parents' noses. It was always a lot of fun, even when some of the Muggle children would taunt us for our "funny clothes." I learned how to play Jacks on that playground, and Maximus got to play with a cap gun, which was a toy version of a real Muggle weapon that shoots pieces of metal into people's bodies. But even the Muggles knew things were dangerous back then – we'd have to all run inside whenever the sirens went off, though our Muggle friends would have to go underground into these secret "bunkers," while Maximus and I simply got to run back home. Since our house was Unplottable and protected with magical shields, the bombs didn't have as much effect on us as it did on our neighbors. My father served as one of the Minister's aids at the time and often had to travel abroad to Bulgaria and Romania for work, and I remember Mother waiting up every night to make sure he arrived home on time after every single trip. Even long after Grindelwald fell Mother would still never be able to sleep until Father arrived home.

By the time I attended Hogwarts, Grindelwald had been defeated, and with it, small changes started to creep in. Minister Spencer-Moon hired a few new employees from Muggle families in different departments. The term “Muggle-born” was used more actively, as the previous, more disgusting term reminded people too much of Grindelwald’s horrors. Muggle Studies became an optional class in my second year, and I was one of the first students to take it the following year. It was fascinating, delving into the trinkets and bobbles of the Muggle world and amusedly observing their interesting non-magical takes on our own magical innovations. Things like baseball bats and typewriters were charming novelties that made for great essay subjects. I was quite proud to receive an O on both my OWL and NEWT for Muggle Studies, as I knew knowledge of Muggles and their culture would more than serve me well at the Ministry of Magic.

Given the subject of this letter and the lengths to which my career has already been discussed by scholars and critics alike, I will not discuss my time at the Ministry in great detail. What I will discuss, however, are the feelings that lengthy career brought out in me – the horror, the anger, and more than any other, the grief. The day before I was to start my new job as Junior Undersecretary to the Minister in 1975, my best friend from Hogwarts, Georgette Fawcett, had been admitted to St. Mungo’s after having been mauled by werewolf Death Eater Fenrir Greyback. The next morning I got the news that she had passed away from her injuries. In 1976 I personally witnessed two of my coworkers die when a Death’s Head Shell exploded near our superior Minister Minchum’s podium. In 1979 my brother Maximus was possessed via the Imperius Curse and, under the direction of the Death Eaters, killed three members of the Order of the Phoenix before being killed by Sirius Black in self-defense. My father was killed in an attack near King’s Cross Station in 1980, and in the years following his death, Mother would still wander the house, delirious and unable to sleep, because she was waiting for Father and Maximus to come home.

The War had a steep cost for my family, and it’s taken a long time to rebuild from that. There were times, while I was in office, that my grief and anger likely affected my decisions, and because of that, there are people who I know I have wronged, and because many of them are no longer alive, I now have no chance to make up for the errors I made. Despite those mistakes, however, I deluded myself into thinking that I could simply move forward, away from them – and over the course of the next ten years, it felt like the Wizarding World had as well. Wizards started taking cues from Muggle clothing trends, wearing leather jackets and jeans. Muggle foods like pizza started popping up in wizard-owned restaurants. The registries of Ministry employees had more Muggle names than ever before, and for the first time in my memory, a band with a prominent Muggle-born member – the Weird Sisters – become the most popular wizard musicians in Great Britain.

Over time we’ve become comfortable with these little nuggets of Muggle influence cropping up in pop culture and even occasionally in our day-to-day lives. But as of late, the world has become a much scarier place, and in this atmosphere of fear, a bizarre hatred and distrust of Muggles and Muggle-born witches and wizards has seemingly sprouted up from nowhere, growing like parasitic weeds in our hearts and minds. This War between the Death Eaters and the rest of the Wizarding World has devolved, with the rest of our world being destroyed from within by a vicious civil war of blood politics. Where we once saw two different cultural backgrounds, we now see inferior and superior races. Suddenly we look at a 14-year-old Muggle-born witch who befriended all of the classmates working beside her and earned my respect for her brilliance and talent and see a fanged beast wishing to feed off of the magic of our precious Pureblood children! And all of this started not from the Death Eaters – but, I now realize, from us.

I am a mother of three and a grandmother of two. I grew up in a wizarding family with roots as far back as the 17th century, and although I have friends who came from Muggle families and got top grades in Muggle Studies while at school, I myself have little to no personal experience in the Muggle world. Over the course of many years, I subconsciously started to see Muggles as separate from us – not just physically, but also emotionally. It was never a malicious thing, but there was still a boundary there, as if I were still looking down at them from my window like when I was a child. Even when I studied them, my teachers would put quotes around Muggle phrases and compare their inventions frequently (and often unfavorably) to our magical counterparts. The Muggles' funny traditions and quirks charmed me the way a puppy rolling over on its back can. And it was through my classes and society's subconscious lessons that I had been coaxed into a thought process that deemed Muggles as fragile, pitiable, almost lesser creatures. But through reflection and through the counsel of good friends like Albus Dumbledore and Gordon Ramsay, I've learned that despite their lack of magical talent, they are in no need of help from the Wizarding World. They are resourceful enough and strong enough and smart enough to create their own world, without the use of magic – one that allows them to live, work, play, and create on their own terms. They are feeling, free human beings, with hearts and minds as brilliant as our own. They have their own wars to fight and their own demons to slay – and so they should neither be persecuted as inferior nor forcibly coaxed into fighting for our causes. They deserve to live their lives and deal with their own problems, while we deal with ours.

This surge in anti-Muggle sentiment does not come solely from hatred, but also from our society at large. We still, by and large, will judge someone favorably simply because of their family name. We still will hire someone from an established wizard family over someone from a Muggle one. We still feel a touch of surprise whenever we encounter a Muggle-born who shows impressive talent at magic, while expecting nothing less from a so-called "Pureblood." And this all comes back to the way our magical society operates today. Because more people from magical families climb the ladder of power, we associate them with it, and because Muggle-borns often have to shed everything of who they were due to the Statute of Secrecy, we judge them for not having a wide circle of associates that we can refer to for recommendations. Because so many magical families have been able to build up solid reputations over the course of many years, we look down on those who have no such legacy, even though so many of the great oak trees that are those great magical families likewise started as a tiny, promising acorn of a witch or wizard. Because we see our own pain and struggles, we refuse to acknowledge those of others and refuse to consider how some of the gifts we've been given were at the expense of those others. Because we put in so much work to get ahead in today's world, we disregard the fact that we may not have earned our rewards solely through that work, but also because of the esteem in our family name. Because we do not take the time to acknowledge how many more roadblocks are put in the way of Muggle-borns – the lack of magical support from their families, the difference in cultural background, the discrimination – we treat any shortcomings they express as evidence of lesser magic, rather than the result of many extraneous favors. Things that are old and established can feel familiar and comforting, but they can also give way to complacency and stagnation, and as valuable as tradition is, it should never be at the cost of progress.

I do believe our world is just and that these ideas of blood superiority will fade away, as they did when Grindelwald was defeated and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named fell the first time...but it shall be up to us how many more people die before that happens. I lost so many loved ones in the First Wizarding War, and I hope beyond hope that this new generation of promising young witches and

wizards, as well as my grandchildren's generation, will not undergo the pain and grief that I had to. And so I challenge Uric Cuffe, Adrian Enrouge, and everyone else in between to look inward at yourselves. Acknowledge the cruelties and weaknesses in your heart that force you to solely see yourselves and your needs, at the expense of the rest of the world. Realize how much doom that line of thinking will bring both to you and others and, most of all, make a change.

Once long ago I fought for the Wizarding World's right to party. Starting today, I shall take on a new fight – to destroy the evil not just in others, but also in myself – and I pray that the rest of the Wizarding World shall do the same.

Millicent Bagnold

Minister of Magic (1980-1990)

Notes

March 7, 1997

Dear Ron,

Hope that the enchanted windows in St. Mungo's are as sunny as it is here...I'm not a Quidditch player, and even I thought it looked like a beautiful day for flying.

We welcomed two new members to the Cooking Club this week: a first year Slytherin named Richard Thorne and Owen's best friend from Hufflepuff, Eleanor Bradstone. We haven't told them about our scrapbook, but I think it's great having younger members join up. It really feels like our new club might stick around, you know?

Hope you're doing well!

Kevin

March 10, 1997

Dear Ron,

I found this editorial in the *Daily Prophet* today and thought you'd like it. Hope you're feeling all right!

Love,

Hannah

March 13, 1997

Hey Ron! Here are some pictures of Gryffindor's last practice before the game – the team looks great! I'm sure we'll kick Hufflepuff's butt on Friday!

I'll take pictures of the match and tape them in tomorrow! Hopefully that way, you can feel like

you were really there with us!

Colin

March 15, 1997

Dear Ron,

We lost.

It was all Cormac McLaggen's fault – in the middle of the game, he tried lecturing the other players about their flying and such. When he stole Jimmy Peakes's Beater bat and tried to show him how to use it "properly," Harry flew over to confront him, only for McLaggen to accidentally whack a Bludger right into his face and knock him out cold. Fortunately Ginny was close enough that she was able to catch Harry before he fell, and she and Demelza helped him to the ground. The final score was 320-60.

Harry's okay, fortunately, but he's stuck in the Hospital Wing for a few days, and he's understandably furious. I am too. After the game, the rest of the Gryffindor team gave McLaggen what-for, tearing into him about how he lost them the match and he should quit before Harry has to forcibly kick him off. McLaggen tried to argue, but you would've been so proud of Ginny, she didn't take any of it! She said that the *least* he could've done is try to fill your shoes, given that he was only ever your replacement, but from the start he failed to live up to you in every conceivable fashion, let alone be a decent Quidditch player. I probably wouldn't have called him an "entitled, obnoxious wanker with dicks for brains" like she did, but otherwise I quite agreed with her. You also probably would've loved Luna's commentary, though she did frequently go way far a-field – at one point she spent ten whole minutes rambling about how one of the players had something called "Loser's Lurgy."

Fortunately, as Ginny reminded me, not all hope is lost. The totals still give Gryffindor a slim chance at the Quidditch Cup, as long as we win with a 300 point lead...and Ginny, Demelza, Dean, and Harry are all good enough to manage that, right? It'll be hard, but I'm sure we'll be able to do it.

I'm sorry that this letter hasn't come with better news. As always, we miss you so much.

Love from

Hermione

Dear Ron,

I'm sorry about the match. McLaggen is a perfect joke of a player and as far as I'm concerned, he should go flying off into the sun after what he pulled.

Here's a little drawing to cheer you up. I think I got McLaggen's swollen, oversized head down, though the Bludgers hitting him from all sides are a bit too big. What can I say, my sense of proportions was hampered somewhat by how much pain I wanted those balls to inflict.

Love,

Cho

Here are the pictures from the match, as promised. All of Gryffindor house is furious with McLaggen. Even Cho told him off when he tried talking to her in the hall afterwards...I couldn't have agreed with her more!

I'll send a nicer picture tomorrow – promise!

Later,

Colin

Dear Ron,

I'm really sorry about Gryffindor's loss. The whole thing was super unfair, and I know if things had been different, you would've been the Keeper Gryffindor needed. Can't say you would've won, of course – you were going up against *our* team, after all – but I know the match would've been much better if you'd been there.

I've sent you a red velvet cake by owl post. We all know that the OPS won't let you have it for a couple of days, but I thought you'd need something sweet to cheer you up. In the meantime, don't worry...there's always next time!

Keep your chin up!

Kevin

Dear Ron,

I've sent you an apple pie too. Hopefully the container Arjuna lent me will keep it warm even if the OPS has to examine it.

I know that you can't write back yet, but just know that we're here for you.

Love,

Hannah

Dear Ron,

Whenever I'm dealt a horrible blow, I like to revisit this line that Professor Ramsay used in one of his cookbooks:

"I've had a lot of success; I've had failures, so I learn from the failure."

Failure always feels terrible at first, but it's never an ending unless you let it be. Your team can turn this around...and when you're back, then you Gryffindors can try to take down my team a peg or two. Key word being "try!"

Don't give up!

Arjuna

March 16, 1997

I took the liberty of snatching McLaggen's Potions textbook earlier and modifying it before leaving it on the floor by the Gryffindor table so he could find it. I have no visuals to share, but just imagine the suffocated girlish scream when he opened the book and got a faceful of Jawbind Potion for his trouble.

You're welcome.

MB

There's that nicer picture I promised! I was able to snap this of McLaggen after he got the potion to the face! Nice one, Millicent!

Cheers!

Colin

March 17, 1997

Hey Ron,

To get your mind off the match, here are some pictures from some of my favorite travel magazines. Did you know that Nigeria might have been home to one of the oldest wizard cities in the world? Here are some pictures of the lost city: Nigerian Cursebreakers and wizard historians are still excavating it. I just think it'd be so amazing to go there!

Get well soon,

Owen

March 18, 1997

Dear Ron,

Owen's pictures reminded me of a trip Mother, Father, Astoria, and I once took to Istanbul when we were little. I'll tape pictures in below: I found them in one of my old scrapbooks. If you're wondering why Astoria's hair is so short, it's because she decided to try cutting it herself after seeing Uncle Hyperion shaving and coming to the conclusion that there was no need to have Mother and Father pay money at a salon when she could cut it herself.

Hope you're well,

Daphne

P.S. from Astoria...

I still remember the wonderful smells of jasmine and spices in that bazaar. And fortunately I've gotten a lot better at cutting my own hair since then.

When I was seven, Mum, Dad, and I celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary by going to Prague! My favorite part was taking a horse-drawn carriage back to the guesthouse we were renting and seeing a double rainbow as soon as the rain cleared up. Here's a picture for you, Ron! Hopefully the rainbows will brighten up your day.

Love,

Hannah

I've never been out of the country before, but since we're sharing pictures, here's one of when Dad and I went to the Tower of London! The Tower in the picture is where the two "little princes" were locked up and probably murdered – I love how eerie it is! Also, the crows who live at the Tower are all adorable...there was this one that kept posing for me, so I took a good ten pictures of him. I named him "Photo!"

xoxoxo

Rose

March 19, 1997

I've never been out of the country either, but Mum and I sometimes take day trips to local sites. Here we are at Westminster Abbey, paying our respects to William Wilberforce (we had just finished reading a book about him at the time). Sorry I'm not smiling – I'd just lost my two front

teeth, so I was feeling a bit self-conscious.

Hope you're doing well, Ron!

Bridget

March 20, 1997

My dream (at least travel-wise) is to go to New York City! I've been in love with it since I was little. I would love to see a Broadway show, shop for Christmas gifts in Times Square, try an authentic New York style pizza, and go to the very top of the Empire State Building! Plus it's the home of the Scamander Magizoological Museum, the largest magical creature museum in the world! Here are some pictures and drawings I've done – it took me a little while to compile all of it together, but I hope you like it!

Love,

Cho

March 21, 1997

Dear Ron,

I found this in my trunk the other day! Figured it'd fit in with everyone else's letters about traveling, and bring back some nice memories too...I'll still never forget how excited I was when you first sent me this clipping with my birthday card.

See you on Saturday!

Harry

You went to Egypt?!? You're so lucky, Ron! You *have* to tell me all about the pyramids and the curses and the sphinxes when you get back!

Owen

I remember seeing that article on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*! It's so strange how young you look there, Ron. You would've only been twelve or thirteen, right? It looks like it was a really fun trip.

Love from

Astoria

March 24, 1997

Hi Ron,

Here's a great editorial from the *Prophet* this morning that made me smile! R.J. Moon has a way with words.

The Cooking Club has four more new members: sixth year Hufflepuffs Sophie Roper, Lisa Turpin, and Oliver Rivers and Eloise Midgen, who you probably already know, as she's a Gryffindor in your year. Eloise has a particular talent for making crepes.

Hope you're doing well!

Kevin

March 26, 1997

Dear Ron,

I know you're not much of a reader, but I thought this quote was relevant enough to your situation

that it might be helpful. It's from a very good Muggle book called *The Secret Garden*.

With one strong, steady push, the chair was inside the Secret Garden. Colin fell back against his pillow as the wheelchair stopped. He dropped his hands from his eyes and slowly looked around. Vines of green leaves covered the walls like a carpet. Splashes of purple, white, and pink blossoms covered the trees and bushes. Wings fluttered above the boy's head, and the sun gently warmed his thin, young body. A pink glow suddenly spread across his face, and Colin Craven, the boy who was convinced he would die, cried out, "I shall get well! I shall get well! And I shall live forever and ever and ever..."

Stay strong!

Arjuna

March 27, 1997

I remember *The Secret Garden*! I had to read it for school, though my favorite was *Treasure Island*. It's a Muggle book too, so you probably wouldn't know it, Ron, but it's really good! It's about a boy named Jim Hawkins who finds a treasure map and sails to an island filled with pirate treasure and goes on an adventure. It's awesome!

Cheers!

Colin

That sounds cool, Colin. It kind of reminds me a little of the *Darren, Cursebreaker* books – I used to read them a lot as a kid. Did you read any of those, Ron? I've always loved the one where Darren sneaks into the Japanese Ministry of Magic to expose a wicked kelpie disguised as their Minister before it can kill again!

Owen

I've only read one of those books, but it was pretty cool. I've always been more into comic books, though, like *The Adventures of Martin Miggs the Mad Muggle* or *X-Men*! I really love Northstar; I was so disappointed when they cancelled the *Alpha Flight* series.

Kevin

March 28, 1997

My favorite book's *The Last Unicorn*! Here's my favorite part from it:

"It's a rare man who is taken for what he truly is," he said. "There is much misjudgment in the world. Now I knew you for a unicorn when I first saw you, and I know that I am your friend. Yet you take me for a clown, or a clod, or a betrayer, and so must I be if you see me so. The magic on you is only magic and will vanish as soon as you are free, but the enchantment of error that you put on me I must wear forever in your eyes. We are not always what we seem, and hardly ever what we dream. Still I have read, or heard it sung, that unicorns when time was young, could tell the difference 'twixt the two – the false shining and the true, the lips' laugh and the heart's rue."

xoxoxo

Rose

Mum and I read *The Hobbit* a lot when I was little. It's a story about a Hobbit (which are these made-up creatures sort of like a friendly cross between a dwarf and a human -- basically, think Professor Flitwick, except with hairy feet) who goes on an adventure with twelve dwarfs and a wizard in order to slay an evil dragon that stole the dwarfs' treasure a long time ago. I always liked the idea of this little guy getting thrown into an adventure but then really proving himself when he's put in danger.

Talk to you later, Ron!

Bridget

March 29, 1997

Mother and Father didn't give us a lot of books growing up unless they were textbooks, but Uncle Hyperion brought Daphne and me a copy of the original tales of Beedle the Bard once and the three of us spent the whole day reading *The Fountain of Fair Fortune* under the willow tree on the grounds. That one's always been my favorite, even if Mother and Father always disapproved of it.

Love from

Astoria

I always preferred *The Warlock's Hairy Heart* myself. It's dark, yes, but the message is important: shut your heart away from love long enough, and it becomes monstrous.

Hope you're well, Ron –

Daphne

March 30, 1997

I love *The Fountain of Fair Fortune*! Mum, Dad, and I saw a production of it in Hogsmeade once when I was little – it was so pretty! I loved all the magical puppets they used. Ron, you would've loved the knight: Dad talked with the production designer after the show and she said she'd based his armor on a Quidditch Keeper's uniform!

Love,

Hannah

April 1, 1997

I read the *Tale of the Three Brothers* over and over as a kid. I think the moral is so important, not to be afraid of Death just because it's mysterious. It's something I think Shakespeare tackles beautifully in *Hamlet*, when Hamlet accepts death with grace, while still pleading his friend to tell his story. Though *Babbity Rabbity* is a fun read too.

Arjuna

I like the morals of the others, but I agree with Astoria and Hannah, I like *Fair Fortune* best. It has the most interesting and compelling characters, I think, and I always loved the ending. I loved drawing Amata and the knight when I was little – can't find any of my old drawings right now, so I guess I'll just sketch one quickly now!

Love,

Cho

April 2, 1997

My favorite book has always been *Matilda*. It's a Muggle story about a very smart little girl who lives with her abusive family and finds true friends when she goes to school, and even ends up discovering that she has a kind of magic, too! I've always related to it a lot, though Matilda's family reminds me a lot of Harry's aunt and uncle. I don't know if it'd be something you'd like, Ron, but the ending where Matilda gets to move into a new house with her kind teacher at the end always made me happy.

Hope you're feeling all right – we all really miss you!

Love from

Hermione

April 6, 1997

Dear Ron,

In Defense Against the Dark Arts today, Neville showed Snape up by nonverbally disarming Crabbe! Snape didn't give him any points, of course, but he looked *so* surly about the fact that Neville of all people had managed to cast a nonverbal spell before the students from his house! Though he *did* take the opportunity to rub it in my face, saying that I should have done it months ago, if Neville could do it. Neville looked guilty about it, but I frankly don't care – I'm so proud of him!

Hope to come visit again this weekend – we'll make sure to come in the morning, before your physical therapy session with Jengu. Ginny has told me to tell you not to strain yourself, because you'd look like a idiot injuring yourself even further when you're trying to get better. I wouldn't

say that exactly, but please be careful all the same.

See you soon,

Harry

April 8, 1997

Enclosing another great editorial from R.J. Moon — whoever this person is, they really know how to write! I particularly love this quote:

“Wisdom is often a trait associated with age, but at present, no adult at the Ministry of Magic has stepped forward to address the growing threat in a meaningful way. There has been plenty of action, of course, but the vast majority of it has been thoughtless and frenetic to the point that the gesture is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Cheers!

Colin

April 10, 1997

Hi Ron,

It's a bit gray outside today, but fortunately things are reasonably cheerful here. The Cooking Club has three new members: first year Hufflepuff James Tuckett, third year Slytherin Byron Miller, and Gryffindor second year Euan Abercrombie. All of them have great potential, but Euan in particular reminds me of you – he's a real risk taker with flavors!

Cho's been working on some concepts for a logo for our club. She said she'll sketch them in later so you can see them...I'm sure they'll be great!

Kevin

Here you go, Ron,

These are the logo concepts I've been working on. I particularly like how the last one with the crossed wand and mixing spoon turned out. I also finished this sketch of our 21 club members – it was hard to fit everybody in, so it took a while, but I think it turned out pretty well! Hope it's okay I put you over on the left with the Slytherins rather than next to Colin – you're just so much taller than him, and I knew I just had to put you and Bridget next to each other. I hope to have a copy inked and colored by the time you get back!

Love,

Cho

April 12, 1997

Dear Ron,

A lot of people are sending in editorials to the *Prophet* now – the paper's started expanding their section, probably to keep up with all the submissions. I'd bet it's largely thanks to Bagnold speaking out...everyone suddenly feels inspired to speak out too! It's so exciting.

I don't want to take up too much room, so here are the best ones. A lot of them are signed with obvious pennames, but judging by his writing style, I think "S. Seeker" has to be Goodfellow. Hope you like them!

Love from

Astoria

April 13, 1997

Pansy got in her head to confront Lily Moon for the *Daily Prophet's* recent editorials. Even if Moon claimed that she doesn't have anything to do with "R.J. Moon," Pansy tried to hex her for being a liar, but your sister protected Moon by setting a Bat Bogey Hex on her. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't smiling just a little.

MB

I was smiling more than a little. And I'm sure you are too, right, Ron?

Love,
Bridget

Was able to catch this candid shot of Pansy getting hit with Ginny's Bat Bogey Hex...priceless!

Cheers!
Colin

April 15, 1997

Mr. Whiskers says hi! I had to take this picture on my bed, since Mr. Whiskers is too scared to leave the dorm most of the time. He didn't like the magical camera, though – the smoke startles him.

xoxoxo
Rose

April 16, 1997

Hi Ron,

Since we're sharing pet pictures, here's one of my warty friend! Meet Wallace, A.K.A. Wally,

A.K.A. Wally-Boy, A.K.A. the smartest toad you'll ever meet in your life. He loves to imitate voices he hears by croaking at different octaves – you should hear his attempt at Professor Snape!

Hope everything's going okay!

Kevin

April 17, 1997

Daphne and I both have Eagle owls, named Beaumont and Wagtail: here's a picture of them! Mine's the one on the right that looks like he's smiling.

Love from

Astoria

April 18, 1997

I have an owl too! Her name is Gwenog (Gwen for short), after Gwenog Jones of the Holyhead Harpies. Here's a picture of when I first got her as a baby! Isn't she cute?

Love,

Cho

I'd love to get an owl, but Mum and I just can't afford it right now. I hope to buy one after I graduate, though. I've already picked out the perfect name -- "Carabosse," or "Carey" for short. (That way the nickname could be for a boy or a girl.)

Hope you're doing well, Ron!

Bridget

April 19, 1997

Hey Ron,

Here's a picture of my dog! He's a yellow Labrador and his name is Pogo, because he likes to jump up and down like he's on a pogo stick. Sometimes he even chases squirrels by trying to jump up into the trees in our yard! It's so funny to watch. I'm not allowed to bring him to school with me, so Mum and Grandma Trudy take care of him when I'm not there. Whenever I come home, he loves to jump up on his back legs and put his front paws on my shoulders like he's giving me a big hug.

Hope everything's okay with you!

Owen

April 20, 1997

I lost my cat Bree last year, but I think I'll be getting a new one next year when I have the chance to shop around. The Magical Menagerie has a good selection, but I adopted Bree at a smaller pet shelter in Salazar's Grove that was going through hard times, and I'd prefer to do that again if I can. May as well try to save an animal that wouldn't have a home otherwise than just pick up a normal one that anyone would adopt.

Here's an old picture of Bree: it took me a while to track down, since I didn't take many pictures of her. As you can see, she only had one eye – she was that way when I first got her. I got that glass eye for her to protect her eye socket from infection, as well as to stop people from looking at her funny.

MB

She was so cute, Millicent! And I love how she keeps looking over at her tail like she's thinking about pouncing on it...Mr. Whiskers is too much of a scaredy-cat to even think about chasing his tail! I'm sorry you lost her.

xoxoxo

Rose

April 22, 1997

Dear Ron,

Katie's back at school! She's completely recovered, though she doesn't remember who gave her the cursed necklace. Still, it's really good to have her back. Once you're back too, then everything will be the way it should be.

I planned a team practice for the end of the week so Katie can reorient herself. In the meantime, Dean's agreed to play as Keeper during our practices – he's not as good of a Keeper as he is a Chaser, but he's at least a good placeholder. I've had to tell Ginny to not hit him quite so hard with the Quaffle a few times though.

Hermione plans to bring another set of notes on nonverbal spells for our next visit. Fortunately I was able to persuade her to compress them slightly from the huge stack she'd originally written.

Hope you're well,

Harry

April 25, 1997

HEY GuYs!

J eNgu saYs I'll BE oUt by NeXT weeK!! I CAN't WaiT!!!

WrItE baCk SoOn,

ROn

Ron Returns

Ron was scheduled to arrive back in Hogsmeade via Portkey on the second of May, just over a week before Gryffindor's final match against Ravenclaw. (The Healers had decided that a Portkey would be safer than the Floo Network, as Ron was still a little shaky on his feet.) An Auror escort would then accompany him back to Hogwarts on foot.

Ron finished tucking in his shirt with some difficulty, before getting to work on his Gryffindor necktie.

The feeling had mostly returned to his hands by now, but he still had trouble separating his fingers so that he could use just one at a time, like if he needed to point at something. His hands and feet would still fall asleep a lot, and occasionally there'd be flares of white-hot pain that would surge through his nerve endings, as if molten metal was flooding to the tips of his fingers.

Ron fumbled with his tie, trying to fight it into submission. Unfortunately his thumb was stuck at its side and his pointer and ring fingers were both moving in unison rather than separating properly, so he was having trouble knotting the tie without also knotting his arms in the process.

Seeing Ron's problem, Jengu walked over and extended his hands.

"Here – would you like some help?"

Deflating in visible frustration, Ron dropped his hands. Jengu fastened the red and gold tie around Ron's neck, likely more neatly than Ron ever had in his life.

"Thanks," mumbled Ron halfheartedly.

Jengu offered him a small smile.

"I know it's frustrating," he said, "but just remember how much progress you've made. Just two months ago, you couldn't even sit up in bed. In two more months – who knows?"

An abrupt shout echoed from the hallway outside. Ron looked up, startled; amazingly, Jengu didn't

even turn around, though his face quickly turned grave.

“Ron,” he said very quietly, “whatever you and your friends are up to...I want you to be safe...do you understand?”

Ron looked at Jengu in surprise. Jengu’s dark, sharp-lidded eyes were very serious, but not at all cold as they bore into Ron’s blue.

“That letter you received from Harry mentioned something about a *project* Dumbledore and you were working on. I can only presume it has to do with the Order of the Phoenix – Ron, I’m not stupid, and neither is the Ministry,” he added sharply to cut Ron off when he tried to object. “The Minister’s wary of *any* group working outside his authority, whether they’re on his side or not... and I daresay the thought of soldiers with loyalties to anything besides the Ministry, *especially* child soldiers, would terrify him.”

“We’re not children,” said Ron before he could stop himself.

“Yet you’re Dumbledore’s soldiers?” Jengu shot back.

There was a short, tense silence. Jengu glanced over his shoulder as the voices out in the hall started to rise; then he turned back to Ron, taking a hold of his shoulder.

“Ron, I understand your desire to fight,” he said lowly, “and believe me, I admire it. I’m fighting for what I believe in, too. All I hope is that you’ll be careful – the people you’ve allied yourself with have put a target on your back as well.”

“You mean like the people you’ve allied yourself with?” Ron challenged him.

Jengu smiled wryly despite himself. “Right.”

Ron, however, wasn’t smiling. “So you *agree* with Enrouge – that we should force Muggles to join an army that we could use against the Death Eaters?”

“What Adrian said was taken out of context,” said Jengu dismissively. “He may be prone to

hyperbole, but he's not a monster. We simply want the Muggles to help us in our fight – and given that Death Eaters hate both us and them, it seems only appropriate that they ally themselves with us.”

“But what if they don't want to fight?” demanded Ron.

Jengu's expression contorted slightly. “Of course they'd *want* to – the Death Eaters would kill them if they didn't, now wouldn't they? Once they know the scope of the danger they're in, they'll want protection – we could *give* them that protection, if they agreed to fight against our common enemy – ”

“So you'll force them to fight or die, then?” said Ron, his voice rising. “Hold their and their families' lives over their heads so that they'll fight the Death Eaters *for* you!?”

“ONLY I SHALL DECIDE WHO SHALL BE HIRED OR FIRED IN THIS ESTABLISHMENT!” roared a female voice in the hall.

Both Ron and Jengu hushed abruptly, their focus turning to the closed door that led to the hallway. Jengu's face went visibly paler and his grip on Ron's shoulder tightened.

Ron looked up at the Healer, his blue eyes flickering between judgment and concern.

“...That's Madame Healer Feverfew, isn't it?”

Jengu glanced back at Ron, his dark eyes glinting sadly. “Yes. The Auror Department has been putting pressure on her lately – they believe that she's harboring political dissidents in her ranks... shielding them from Ministry inquiries.”

“Like you,” said Ron.

Jengu's black eyes glinted with something more earnest as he turned to face him properly.

“Ron, whatever you think about me, I beg you – *please be careful*. I'm a Healer – if I knew I was sending you out into the world, only for you to die on the field of battle – ”

For a second, Ron saw another set of eyes in Jengu's place: brown, framed with freckles and a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, and rippling an insane variation of morality that could sicken even the most grounded and assured of men. The kind of misguided morality that could tear a family apart...

Ron choked.

The door opened abruptly, and two people entered the room. One was a lightly tanned witch dressed in lime green robes and a matching headscarf, and the other was a tall man dressed in dark scarlet robes with a face and frame that made him resemble a vulture.

"Jacques," the witch addressed Jengu in a shaky voice, "Mr. Savage would like to speak with you, in my office."

Jengu straightened up sharply. His sharp-lidded eyes drifted from the witch over to Savage slowly, before he put on his best attempt at a pleasant smile.

"...Of course, Madame Healer."

He released Ron's shoulder and headed to the door, trying to ignore the nasty glare Savage gave him as he followed him out.

Feverfew turned to Ron, her lightly tanned face visibly upset but trying to smile anyway.

"I have your Portkey ready, Mr. Weasley," she said kindly. "It'll be ready to take you back to Hogwarts in a minute."

Indicating the clock that read 11:59 overhead, she put down an empty flowerpot on Ron's side table. Ron tried to smile, but he couldn't help but glance at the door through which Jengu had departed.

Feverfew regarded Ron with a sympathetic eye.

“You and Jacques got along rather well while you were here,” she presumed, her words almost sounding like a question, but not quite.

Ron nodded. Feverfew considered this for a short, silent moment; then she returned her focus to Ron.

“...Did Jacques...ever mention his politics to you? Did he ever say anything...*radical*?”

Ron looked up at Feverfew. Her face looked visibly pale and frightened – like even just asking these questions was doing something incredibly wrong.

“No,” Ron said at last. “Never.”

He picked up the Portkey and, before Feverfew could ask him anything else, Ron put on his best smile and said, “Well – see you.”

And with the strike of 12, he disappeared.

In a flash, Ron arrived just outside the Three Broomsticks. The familiar smells of butterbeer and ham immediately swirled around his nostrils, making Ron beam widely – oh, how he’d missed Hogsmeade!

“Ron!”

Ron looked up.

Striding up the street toward him was a witch with short, mousy brown hair. It took him a minute to identify her, but her usual pale, heart-shaped face was always distinctive.

“Tonks!” he greeted happily. “*You’re* my escort?”

“Yes,” she said. Tonks looked noticeably less chipper than usual, so when she replied, her voice was brusque and lacking of the usual pleasantries. “We’ll want to head out quickly – Hogsmeade’s

still considered unsafe to Hogwarts students, so the Headmaster will want you back at the castle as soon as possible.”

Fortunately despite how off-kilter he was on his feet, Ron was able to keep up with Tonks’s quick pace thanks to the large strides his long legs afforded him. Unfortunately Tonks seemed uninterested in conversation – Ron tried a few times to engage her, but she seemed characteristically distracted and gloomy.

“There’ve been some good editorials in the *Prophet* lately,” Ron said at one point.

“Mm,” said Tonks.

“They were fun to read, when I was stuck in the ward. A lot of the writers had pennames, but I reckon I know who a lot of them were – Terence Goodfellow, Professor Lupin – ”

Tonks looked up, visibly startled. “Remus?”

“Yeah, I was surprised too!” laughed Ron. “Always knew he was brilliant, but I didn’t know he could write *that* well...but I mean ‘*R.J. Moon?*’ A little on the nose, but still pretty brilliant – ”

Tonks looked down at the ground, her eyes narrowing in thought. Ron’s smile faltered.

“...Tonks?”

The older witch ignored Ron’s concern; forcing composure back to her face, she pressed on, speeding up her steps.

“We’re almost there now, come on.”

Soon enough, the towers of Hogwarts castle started coming into view one by one. As more and more of the castle appeared over the horizon, Ron felt his heart soar. He wondered if this was just a fraction of the feeling that Harry had felt when he’d first laid eyes on Hogwarts, after having lived eleven whole years with his awful family on that boring old block called Privet Drive.

When Tonks and Ron passed through the wall of magical enchantments and the line of hardened Aurors positioned outside the castle, they were met by an entire mob assembled in the courtyard, carrying red and gold banners and streamers. They were all clapping, cheering, shouting, and singing “*Weasley is our King*” at the top of their lungs, and as Ron stared, Hermione, Harry, Ginny and the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team broke apart from the crowd, all running to greet him.

His heart swelling up like a balloon and his eyes filling with tears, Ron ran to them. Even though his foot kept clenching up and making him stumble and he constantly felt like he was about to fall over, he somehow made it over to Hermione, throwing both of his arms around her and hugging her tightly. Harry brought his arms around both of them, as did Ginny, and then Demelza and Katie, then Peakes and Coote, and soon the group of Gryffindors were all sobbing happy tears in a squeezing, affectionate clump on the ground. In the singing mob, Ron caught sight of so many beaming faces – Dumbledore – Professor McGonagall – Kevin – Owen – Hannah – Arjuna and Astoria – Bridget – Professor Ramsay – as well as the white flash that had to belong to Colin’s camera.

If Ron ever felt the need to make a Patronus in the future, he knew he could just think back on that wonderful feeling of his best friends and Quidditch teammates all huddled around him as the rest of Hogwarts sang his name.

The next few days went better than Harry could have imagined. Ron had some trouble getting caught up in class since his fingers were still so inflexible and he had to use a Quick-Quotes Quill to write his essays, but otherwise Harry thought he was getting back in the swing of things pretty well. Fortunately McGonagall had excused Ron from making up all of his past assignments and Ramsay had been kind enough to give Ron some extra Potions and Charms tutoring to help him catch up in time for his final exams. Even Quidditch practice wasn’t as bad as one could’ve expected – sure, Ron still had trouble *catching* the Quaffle, but he could still knock it out of the way and block the hoops with ease. It left Harry feeling confident that the game on Saturday would be an unparalleled success.

Harry knew that there was only one thing that could prevent things from going as they should, and that was Malfoy. Although he’d been very good about keeping a happy face on around Hermione and Ron, Harry was still convinced that Malfoy had cursed Katie and poisoned Ron and was still plotting to help Voldemort. He’d been able to coax Dobby and (a bit unwillingly) Kreacher to help spy on Malfoy while he was busy supporting Ron, and although he’d gotten some new information, the problem remained that, for all of Harry’s suspicions, he still had no concrete proof of Malfoy’s illicit activities.

For one, Harry suspected Malfoy was an unregistered Animagus. It would explain why Mandrake leaves were stolen from the greenhouses and why the Death's Head Hawk Moths had gone missing from the Forest, as they were two of the ingredients needed to make the potion. It would also explain why no one saw Malfoy the night the rum was poisoned and how he got back to the Slytherin commonroom without Harry noticing. Even if Malfoy had been in his Animagus form, the Marauder's Map still would've showed him prowling around. Harry had even seen a white cat prowling around the kitchen that night – that could've been Malfoy!

But despite Harry suspecting this, he had no chance of proving it without catching Malfoy as an animal and then forcing him to reveal himself, and perhaps because Malfoy knew Harry was on to him, he'd not given Harry much chance to do so. And even if Harry could prove Malfoy was an illegal Animagus, he still couldn't prove that Malfoy had been down in the kitchens that night without the Map, and he both couldn't make the Map recall what it had seen that night or even use the Map as evidence with anyone except Dumbledore, and Dumbledore had explicitly told him not to get involved. And of course there was nothing to provide any rationale for *why* Malfoy might have done it in the first place.

Then there was what Malfoy had been up to in the Room of Requirement. Dobby and Kreacher had told Harry he'd been going up to one hallway a lot lately and disappearing for long hours. After some thinking, Harry realized that Malfoy had to be using the Room of Requirement that he and the D.A. had used for their club meetings last year! But for the life of him, Harry could not make the Room of Requirement show him what Malfoy was doing in there. Harry at some points waited for hours outside the Room of Requirement under his cloak, trying to catch Malfoy in the act, but Malfoy must have been asking the Room for an alternative exit on his way out, because whenever Malfoy reappeared on the Map, he would be in a hallway far enough away from Harry that he couldn't catch up! Whatever Harry tried, Malfoy kept evading him, and he got no closer to figuring out what he was up to.

Harry's worry about Malfoy continued to weigh on him as the match approached. Malfoy had been disappearing more and more ever since Ron got back, and it left Harry feeling on edge for what he might be planning. Would Malfoy try to hurt people again – would he try to hurt Ron or Katie or Dumbledore again?

On his way downstairs to meet Ron and Hermione in the Great Hall for lunch, Harry absently wandered down the hallway just beside the Room of Requirement, glancing around critically for some sign that a suspicious white cat might have been prowling around. But as always, there was nothing.

With a sigh, he backtracked down the staircase closest to him, which led him down the hallway that had once been marred with the blood-etched words "*ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.*" Harry almost felt the same sense of dread shudder down his spine at the memory.

Things had been so frightening then, when an unknown monster had been hunting down Muggle-born students. It was scarier now – now *everyone* knew who that monster was...

It was as Harry passed the open door to the abandoned girl's restroom that he stopped in his tracks.

Was someone...*crying*...?

"No one can help me – " choked a male voice that Harry had never heard before, "no one – no one *would* help me – if they knew – "

"There, there," cooed another voice that Harry recognized as Moaning Myrtle's. "That's not true... if you told me, *I'd* help you..."

"You don't understand!" moaned the voice. "I – I *can't*! Nothing I do is working – and if I don't do it soon...he says he'll...he'll...!"

Harry, feeling a rush of curiosity and concern that he couldn't help, inched the door open to look inside. When he did, he felt a kind of horror and shock he could never have imagined.

The person crying was hunched over the sink, his shoulders quaking and his white-blond head bowed over as he sobbed. Moaning Myrtle floated in mid-air beside him, but nothing she whispered or did soothed the aura of despair that emanated off of the boy's back.

The owner of that unfamiliar, choked voice wasn't a stranger at all. It was Malfoy.

And when Malfoy looked up into the cracked mirror and saw Harry standing stock-still and wide-eyed behind him, no one and nothing could have prevented what happened next.

After Sectumsempra

It didn't take long at all for the entire school to hear all about Malfoy and Harry's confrontation in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom and the gruesome results. Malfoy was sent to the Hospital Wing after having supposedly gotten his chest slashed open by an unknown spell, and Harry was condemned to nightly detentions for the rest of the school year. This of course endangered the Gryffindor Quidditch team's chances of victory yet again, for now they were not only without their Captain, but also without their champion Seeker.

Given its now precarious Quidditch standings, it was unsurprising that most of Gryffindor house was very angry with Harry. What Ron had *not* expected was how much the rest of the school turned on Harry as well. The Slytherins, naturally, were furious that Harry had attacked their sixth year Prefect, but the Hufflepuffs were horrified by the extent of the damage and the Ravenclaws seemed to think that Harry was idiotic to use a spell like that in the first place. Ron hadn't been able to get so much as a word out of Owen, Cho, Daphne, or Millicent that entire week. Kevin had talked to Ron as pleasantly as always, but he still pointedly looked around and over Harry while talking to him. Bridget had been kinder than most, but even she was spending a little less time with her Gryffindor friends than usual.

"I don't reckon Potter meant to hurt Draco that badly," she'd explained solemnly to Ginny, "but I'm sorry, he was still wrong. He needs to own that."

The Cooking Club member who reacted the worst to the news, however, was Astoria. The day after Harry and Malfoy's wand fight she had confronted Harry in the hallway, her pale face flushed with a kind of anger Ron had never seen before.

"What the hell were you playing at?!" she'd yelled at Harry.

Ron had immediately stepped in to defend his best friend. "Astoria, Harry was just trying to defend himself – "

"You can defend yourself without *slashing somebody open!*" Astoria retorted.

"I wasn't – " Harry said weakly, his green eyes rippling with shame. "I didn't – I didn't know it would do that – "

"*Didn't know?*" roared Astoria.

Arjuna tried to grab Astoria's shoulder, but Astoria yanked out of her grip, getting right up in Harry's face. The more emotional she got, the more her voice shook.

"How *dare* you even think about using a spell on an innocent person without knowing what it could do! You vile – brainless – unthinking – "

"Astoria, *shut it!*" Ron snapped in a mixture of disbelief and anger. "Malfoy was no victim here – he tried to use the Cruciatus Curse on Harry!"

Astoria whirled on Ron, her light blue eyes flaring. "Potter *thinks* he tried to use the Cruciatus Curse – Moaning Myrtle said that Malfoy never finished the spell he'd been casting! And even if Malfoy *had* been fighting back, and no matter *what* Potter thinks he did to you, that's still no excuse!"

Ron's eyes narrowed in confusion. "What?"

"I heard you and Malfoy in the hall," Astoria snapped at Harry, "how you accused him of poisoning Ron – is that why Malfoy first shot spells at you, Potter? Because you were bullying him about your stupid theory?"

"No!" Harry said quickly.

"Then perhaps you attacked him because you thought he'd hurt Ron and you justified using that spell because he *deserved* it?"

"That's not it!"

Despite her visible upset, Hermione whirled on Astoria with ferocity. "It was only an *accident*! If you're so disdainful of Harry's theories, perhaps you should stop making up baseless ones of your own and leave it alone!"

Astoria glared at Hermione and then at Harry, her eyes like fiery light blue coals.

“However much of a prat Malfoy is, I’d always expected better of you, Potter,” she whispered coldly, her voice still shaking despite the lessened volume. “Here I thought someone labeled as the ‘*Chosen One*’ would never hurt someone unnecessarily...but then again, maybe that label’s gone to your head.”

She turned on her heel and stormed off, her long chestnut hair sweeping behind her. Arjuna followed after her, her face much more concerned than angry but no less solemn.

For his part, Harry seemed to agree with everyone’s negative opinions and then some. He’d barely said a word after what had happened and had taken to spending long hours in front of the Gryffindor fireplace, staring into the flames but clearly not seeing them at all.

Ron watched Harry sit in front of the fire while he and Hermione worked on their Charms essay one night. Eventually it got to the point that they were unable to continue, as he and Hermione kept looking up to check on Harry instead of reading their textbooks, so Ron put down his essay and came over to sit on the rug next to Harry. Harry didn’t notice until Ron leaned his shoulder absently against his leg resting on the floor.

“You thought Malfoy was the one who poisoned me?” Ron asked quietly.

Harry swallowed the ball of guilt that had formed in his throat.

“...Yeah.”

Ron didn’t reply. Harry took his silence as disapproval and quickly tried to explain.

“That’s not why I used that spell! I just – it happened so fast – and he started to say ‘*Crucio*,’ it’s the only thing he could’ve been saying – and I just – it was the first spell that came to mind – if I’d known, I would’ve *never* – ”

Hermione brought a hand onto Harry’s shoulder, squeezing it gently.

“We know, Harry,” she said softly.

Ron took Harry's hand and gave him a small smile.

"We know," he said.

Regardless of what the rest of the school thought, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny stood by Harry without hesitation. Ron and Ginny even agreed with Harry's choice to not throw away the Half-Blood Prince's book, where Harry had learned that spell he'd used on Malfoy – after all, without that book, Harry wouldn't have had a bezoar on him the day Ron got poisoned. Unfortunately Harry had had to hide the Half-Blood Prince's book in the Room of Requirement to hide it from Snape, and he'd had no chance to go back and get it, since Snape was keeping such an extra close eye on him. That made the sixth year Gryffindors' next Potions class with Ramsay incredibly uncomfortable.

"Oh come *on*, Harry," said Ramsay, his eyebrows coming together in frustration as he looked over the tar-like mixture Harry had turned in at the end of class that was supposed to be a Hair-Growing Potion, "you *know* that you can't add in the diced caterpillars while it's still on the fire – get it together – "

Harry flushed in shame as Pansy and some of the other Slytherins in the class sniggered behind their hands. He was more than used to Snape criticizing his work, but it felt a million times worse when Ramsay did it – rather than sounding simply cruel, Ramsay's anger rippled with disappointment, as if Ramsay knew Harry could do so much better and so Harry's lack of results was physically hurting him.

To top it all off, Harry's nightly detentions with Snape were just torturous. Every single night he had to help catalogue Filch's old punishment records, and Snape went out of his way to make Harry go through all of those belonging to Sirius, Lupin, Pettigrew, and his father James Potter (which was a significant stack).

After one particularly long detention, Harry headed slowly upstairs toward Gryffindor Tower, dragging his legs along as if they were made of lead. On the way, he was stopped by a familiar voice.

"Hi."

Harry turned. Coming up on the other side of him was Arjuna, carrying a couple of books under her arms.

“...Hi,” Harry mumbled uncomfortably.

Arjuna slowed down slightly to match his steps so that they were walking side by side down the candlelit hall.

“Just finished up with Snape, I suppose?” she asked.

Harry’s eyes drifted down to the floor. “Mm.”

Arjuna considered him for a moment, her black eyes trailing over his face thoughtfully. Then she turned her gaze ahead at the hallway before them.

“I don’t think you meant to do it, Potter,” she said quietly.

This startled Harry enough to look up.

“I reckon the choice you made was just the only choice you saw, even if there were others,” said Arjuna. “It’s easier for outsiders to say what you could’ve done or should’ve done in hindsight, but...well...you wouldn’t have done any of those things...because you didn’t see those other choices at the time. Right?”

“...I guess so.”

“Then your mistake was inevitable, in a way,” Arjuna said with a slight smile. “You *had* to make it – but that doesn’t mean it has to break you.”

Harry felt the tenseness in his shoulders ebb away a bit.

“...Are you speaking from experience?” he asked with a wry twinkle in his eye.

“Just a little,” Arjuna said, her smile broadening.

She tossed her loose black braid over her shoulder casually.

“Speaking from my own experience also,” she said, “if you’re dealing with unknown spells, you can always find a clue in its Latin roots. Like you can with words you don’t know,” she explained, in response to Harry’s confused face. “Like, take the word ‘*geography*’ – the Latin root ‘*geo*’ means it has something to do with the earth, and ‘*graph*’ means description – so ‘*geography*’ is a description of the earth’s surface. Spells are the same way. Take ‘*Lumos*’ – the Latin root is ‘*lux*’ meaning light – like the word ‘*luminous*’ – and the counter-spell, ‘*nox*’ comes from the root meaning darkness.”

Harry gave a bit of an awkward smile. “Heh...sorry, but that’s a little over my head.”

Arjuna laughed. “Don’t worry, you’re not the only one. Mum taught me that trick early on, when she taught me how to read. It’s become second nature to me, but I know it’s not for everyone.”

They had reached the staircase that led to Ravenclaw Tower, so Arjuna climbed the first stair, glancing back at Harry over her shoulder.

“Well...see you, Potter.”

“See you,” said Harry. Before Arjuna could turn and leave, he added, “By the way...thanks.”

Arjuna smiled broadly. “You’re welcome. And Potter...don’t hold what Astoria said against her. She’s just a softhearted sort – she can’t imagine injuring *anybody*, no matter how vile they are. Even if she got bitten by a dragon, I’m sure she’d still somehow find a way to coddle it.”

The image of Hagrid cooing over a baby Norbert sprouted to Harry’s mind and made him grin as Arjuna headed up the stairs and out of sight.

Malfoy was stuck in the Hospital Wing for the next four days. Daphne had been tasked by Snape to copy notes for him while he was incapacitated, which soured Pansy somewhat – she'd likely hoped of rekindling her and Draco's past relationship by her tending to him in bed. Still, with her "best friend" being responsible for helping him, she at least could tag along with her to the Hospital Wing sometimes.

The night before the match against Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, Daphne went to meet up with the Cooking Club as usual, plopping her things over by Astoria so that she wouldn't have to talk to Ron. It wasn't that she was *angry* with Ron, really, but she was still very upset about what Harry had done and Ron was supporting his friend, so Daphne just didn't feel like engaging with him. Fortunately Astoria seemed to be in the same boat.

"I can't believe that Ron is defending what he did," Astoria grumbled. "He *knows* what Potter did was wrong..."

"Potter's his best friend," Daphne said simply. "You defended Belaji after she cheated in the competition –"

"That's different and you know it!" Astoria cut her off sharply.

"Of course it is," Daphne said coolly, "but people stand by their friends even when they do awful things. *I agree with you*," she added quickly, when Astoria opened her mouth to argue further, "I'm just pointing out the facts."

Astoria exhaled in a heavy sigh.

"This whole thing is so...*ugh*," she muttered sourly. "I never thought in a million years I'd ever feel sorry for *Draco Malfoy*, of all people..."

Daphne smirked slightly. "You and me both. Remember when he ruined our new dresses at that Ministry Christmas party?"

Astoria couldn't completely bite back a grin. "Yeah – though I was angrier about him having pushed me into the punchbowl than a ruined dress."

"Speak for yourself!" Daphne huffed sardonically. "My dress was gorgeous!"

Astoria laughed quietly.

At that moment Millicent arrived, sweeping her bag onto the table next to the others'. In the process, she knocked over Daphne's bag, making a bunch of papers fly out onto the floor.

Millicent did not verbally apologize, instead immediately bending down next to Daphne to help pick up her papers. When she handed one piece of parchment in particular back to Daphne, the elder Greengrass scowled.

"Oh –" she hissed, before mumbling a curse so lowly under her breath that no one could hear it.

"What's wrong?" asked Astoria.

"I forgot to bring Draco his notes today," muttered Daphne bitterly. "And now it's too late – guess I'll have to take them to him in the morning...if I can shake Pansy off ahead of time first..."

Millicent snorted derisively. "And here I thought she'd given up on Draco."

Daphne rolled her eyes up toward the ceiling. "I had too, but no! The *minute* he gets sent to the Hospital Wing, she seems to think we're back in third year and she'll be able to coo over his injury like it's some tiny scratch from a hippogriff and everything will go back to the way it was! Merlin, I swear, every time she comes with me, she *insists* on me styling her hair beforehand, all for an encounter that's only ever a minute long at the most with a boy who has already *clearly* moved on...!"

Feeling some sympathy for her sister, Astoria took the page out of Daphne's hand.

"How about I take them, then?" she said with a shrug. "I could always drop them off in the morning before breakfast...it sounds like you could use a break from having to deal with Pansy and Malfoy's dysfunctional romance."

Daphne covered her mouth with her hand to hold in a soft laugh. "Well, all right – if you're offering."

Astoria took Daphne's notes and stuffed them in her bag just as Arjuna entered the kitchens, setting her own bag full of books down on the counter by Astoria's.

"Stori, I found a great new cookbook about old English desserts when I was combing through Shakespeare's works in the library," she said eagerly. "I knew I just *had* to try out the marchpane tart recipe..."

On Saturday morning Astoria got up a little earlier than usual, tied her hair up in a messy ponytail, and headed downstairs to drop Daphne's notes off at the Hospital Wing. The white, sterile room was abandoned except for one figure lying down in a bed in the center of the room, which was illuminated by the sunlight streaking through the tall windows across the sheets.

Draco Malfoy's pale, pointed face looked just as sickly as it had when Astoria had seen him in that hallway. The sheets were drawn all the way up to his neck, but when she entered the room, Malfoy's gray eyes swiveled over to her.

"Hello, Malfoy," Astoria said stiffly as she approached his bed.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed upon her face. "What are you doing here, little Greengrass?"

"Just doing a favor for my sister," she answered lightly. She plopped Daphne's notes down on Malfoy's bedside table. "That's Transfiguration and Defense Against the Dark Arts – Snape's been surprising all of his classes with pop quizzes lately, so you'd better read up just in case."

Malfoy gave a loud scoff and turned away. "You can tell your *sister* that I've already told her I don't care about getting ready for *pop quizzes* – so she can quit wasting her time copying all this bunk."

"That *bunk* is what you need to know to defend yourself against the Dark Arts," said Astoria sharply, her eyes narrowing.

"Feh! You still believe *that* rubbish – that little Shield Charms and '*Expelliarmus*' can put you on even-footing with the Death Eaters?" sneered Malfoy. "The Dark Arts are too powerful to be

fought against with simple *dueling spells* – no amount of homework can protect you from the Dark Lord, when he comes knocking at your door...”

Despite Malfoy’s attempt at bravado, however, it rang hollowly in Astoria’s ears. There was no hint of superiority when Malfoy spoke, like when he was younger – instead his tone was almost... jaded. Cynical. Defeated.

Astoria fixed Malfoy with a reproachful eye. “Maybe not – but I’d still rather know all I can and have a chance at winning than just give up and scrape at You-Know-Who’s feet.”

Malfoy looked at her with faint scorn, but couldn’t seem to summon a proper response, so he simply turned over in bed and away from her. When he did, the sheets slid enough down his frame that Astoria could see his bare, pale back and the outline of a very thick, jagged scar starting at the top of his shoulder and presumably slashing down the front of his torso.

Astoria’s expression shifted from righteous anger to something a little softer as her light blue eyes lingered on Malfoy’s shoulder.

“...I’m sorry about what happened.”

“I don’t need your pity,” snapped Malfoy.

“It’s not pity,” Astoria shot back coldly.

She paused and took a breath, trying to reestablish a hold on her temper before she continued.

“...You must’ve been hit by a very Dark spell, if Madame Pomfrey couldn’t remove all trace of it. My uncle once told me...that all Dark magic is inherently evil because it’s irreversible. You can heal some of the damage...but it always leaves a scar. Most spells aren’t like that. Even with the spells that cause damage...you can always fix what’s broken. Time heals everything...or at least, it’s supposed to. To have to be condemned to *anything* forever...especially something painful, like Dark magic...I don’t think that’s a fate anybody deserves.”

Malfoy lay in completely motionless silence. Upon receiving no response, Astoria shrugged slightly and turned to leave.

“What do *you* know about what I deserve?” came a reply so soft it merely kissed the air.

Astoria stopped, slowly turning back around. Malfoy was still facing away from her; for a moment she wondered if she’d simply imagined his question, as he seemed not to have moved at all.

She hesitated for a moment, considering her response. Finally she decided just to be frank.

“...I know that despite what the *Prophet* says, you’re not your father, and his crimes aren’t yours. I know that however much you hate Potter, you never would’ve tried to kill him, or his friends. I know that however petty and vindictive and terrible you are...you’ve never caused any damage that couldn’t be fixed...because I know that all those people you hurt grew up and became strong enough that you don’t hold any power over them anymore. And because I know all this...I know you didn’t deserve getting cut open with Dark magic. Not even a Death Eater would deserve something that horrible.”

With this, Astoria turned on her heel and walked out of the room, leaving Malfoy once again alone.

The Quidditch Final

With Harry out of commission as Gryffindor Quidditch Captain, Ginny and Ron immediately jumped in to pick up the pieces. Ginny took on Harry's position as Seeker and Captain and asked Dean to take over the remaining Chaser position.

"This whole situation sucks," Ginny told the rest of the team at their last practice before the game, "but we'll just have to make it work."

"Fortunately," Ron interjected with a weak smile, "we're all good enough players that we *can* make it work...right?"

Ginny nodded firmly. "Right – so let's go over our respective strategies. Dean, Demelza, Katie – you focus on the one-two-three pass method Harry assigned you. Jimmy, Ritchie, keep the Bludgers aimed at me for now, but remember, you'll focus solely on *Cho* during the match – give the Chasers time to rack up at least 200 points with a 160 point lead over Ravenclaw before I catch the Snitch. Ron – *protect those hoops, no matter what*. All right, let's go!"

The game was hosted on Saturday as usual. Everyone crowded into the Quidditch pitch to watch the final match of the season, and spirits were high.

Ginny stood in place of Harry at the front of the team as they prepared to walk out onto the field. The team tensely stood around her, holding their breath; it was like all of their hearts were racing in unison as the Ravenclaw team's names were announced one by one.

"Here comes the Ravenclaw team, striding up the pitch!" chirped a familiar voice that Ron for some reason was having difficulty placing. "At the front, Captain and Seeker Cho Chang – HI, CHO! HI!"

A stern clearing of the throat, probably from Professor McGonagall, prompted the commentator to get back on topic.

"...Next, Chasers Noel Harwich, Orla Quirke, and Gerald Vickers – Beaters Ashok Khanna and

Austin Guthrie – and Keeper Stewart Ackerley!”

Ginny glanced back at her nervous teammates, looking just as white as they were and yet much braver.

“Let’s make Harry proud,” she said quietly, her lips curled up in a slight smirk.

The others attempted weak smiles in return, before Ginny turned to face the field ahead and took the first step, leading the others out onto the pitch.

The stands were awash with blue Ravenclaw and red Gryffindor banners, and for a moment, Ron felt like he was right back at the MagicChef finale preparing to face off against Astoria, as he walked out onto the field after the Beaters.

“Here comes the Gryffindor team!” said the commentator brightly. “It’s led today by interim Captain and Seeker, Ginny Weasley – substituting for Harry Potter – ”

A cluster of unpleasant hissing ran over the crowd. Ron looked up at them furiously, but fortunately the commentator firmly yet cheerfully talked over them until everyone quieted down.

“CHASERS DEMELZA ROBBINS, DEAN THOMAS...and...Katie Bell, who returns to the field fully recovered from her injuries! Welcome back, Katie!”

The mention of Katie instantly quieted any remaining anger, and the Gryffindors in the stands all stood up, applauding and cheering in a standing ovation. Katie blushed pink with pride.

Ron looked up at the commentator’s stand for the source of the cheery commentary. He was surprised beyond all reason when he caught sight of tiny Rose Zeller, her brown hair in a pair of cute side buns, standing hunched over the microphone that was set up next to McGonagall. (It was likely Rose couldn’t talk into the microphone properly while sitting, given how short she was.)

“Beaters Jimmy Peakes and Ritchie Coote,” Rose continued brightly, looking up from the notes she must’ve scribbled down for herself, “and also recently returned to the field, Ron Weasley – *HI, RON!*”

She waved enthusiastically down at him, her face stretched wide with an open smile as she purposefully ignored McGonagall's faintly reproachful but still rather amused eye.

Ron waved up at her in return, grinning from ear to ear as the stands once again burst into applause and song.

“Weasley can save anything!

He never leaves a single ring!

That's why Gryffindors all sing

Weasley is our king!”

The Gryffindor and Ravenclaw teams faced each other at the center of the pitch. Madame Hooch stepped forward, as Cho and Ginny split apart from their respective teams and came together.

“Shake hands,” Hooch said briskly.

Cho and Ginny shook hands stiffly. As they split apart and moved back into position, Cho and Ron shot each other a quick nod.

‘She’s not going to go easy on us,’ Ron thought with a faint smirk as he climbed onto his broom. ‘Fortunately...we’re not going to go easy on them, either.’

“Madame Hooch releases the Bludgers and the Golden Snitch – ooh, it’s so pretty, isn’t it?” cooed Rose. “There it goes! Madame Hooch has taken out the Quaffle...and it’s released! GAME ON!”

The match started with a flurry of action that never stopped once. Within the first minute, Gryffindor had already scored its first ten points. The next minute, Noel Harwich managed to sideswipe Ron and score ten points for Ravenclaw. A minute later ten more points for Gryffindor, then Ravenclaw again, and then Gryffindor. It was a relentless tug-of-war where both sides were refusing to give each other a single inch.

“Vickers has the Quaffle – he’s tearing up the field – *OOH!* Hit by a Bludger by Peakes, that’s gotta hurt – Bell’s got the Quaffle – Robbins – Bell – Robbins – Thomas – Thomas has the Quaff – *NO*, intercepted by Quirke – she’s taking it back up the field – she dodges Robbins – dodges a Bludger – shoots – *NO! BLOCKED BY WEASLEY, WAY TO USE YOUR HEAD, RON!* Bell

has the Quaffle now – Robbins – Thomas – intercepted by Harwich! Man, Noel knows how to fly! They're taking it back toward the goal posts – they shoot – **BLOCKED AGAIN BY WEASLEY!** Harwich catches the Quaffle – *OOH*, hit by a Bludger by Coote! That could've been worse! Robbins has the Quaffle now – Thomas – Bell – Thomas – he dodges a Bludger – passes to Bell – Bell shoots – **SCORE! 10 points to Gryffindor!**"

Rose's excitable commentary, however frenzied, was thrilling to listen to. Thanks to Harry's strategy, the Gryffindor Chasers were able to steadily collect points. Unfortunately thanks to Cho's training the Ravenclaw Chasers remained constantly within fifty points of them. If they were to have any chance of winning the Quidditch Cup, Gryffindor needed an at least 150 point lead before Ginny caught the Snitch...

Ron knew he wasn't at his best, given that his fingers were still ridiculously inflexible. He'd been able to keep the Quaffle at bay pretty well by smacking the ball away with his hands, arms, feet, head, and broom, but the problem was he was unable to catch the Quaffle and throw it to his teammates – he'd only been able to hit it away, and sometimes one of the Ravenclaw Chasers would catch it instead of one of his teammates, meaning he'd have to immediately protect a hoop again after having just saved it.

His eyes darted around the field, watching the Quaffle as he tried to think. There *had* to be a better way to block the hoops – there *had* to be something he wasn't thinking of –

Wait – Samson Wright, the Keeper of the Chudley Cannons, used the Starfish and Stick technique to protect all three hoops during their match against the Falmouth Falcons. Sure, a Bludger to the groin had eventually taken him out, but until then he'd protected the goalposts...and even if a Bludger made it through the hoops, it wouldn't score any points...so maybe...

Noel Harwich was driving up the field, the Quaffle in their hands – they zipped around Katie and Demelza and threw the Quaffle at the left goal post –

Ron immediately whacked it out of the way with his arm, but Harwich caught the ball again and prepared to throw it a second time. Barely taking enough time to think, Ron dropped himself off his broom, catching the handle with his wrist and his ankle, and whacked the ball hard out of the way with his entire torso, catapulting it halfway up the field.

"**WHOA, DID YOU SEE THAT!?**" screamed Rose as the crowd went wild. "**HE FELL OFF HIS BROOM, BUT THEN HE CAUGHT HIMSELF AND THEN HE – WHOA!**"

Katie caught the Quaffle, grinning from ear to ear as she zoomed away toward the Ravenclaw goal

posts, tossing it to Demelza, who then scored.

“Nice one, Ron!” cheered Peakes.

“Thanks!” said Ron, panting heavily as he hoisted himself up onto his broom again. “But if I have to do that again, have your Beater bat ready, okay?”

Ginny came up between them, her brown eyes alight with determined fire.

“Jimmy, you stay in this area and protect Ron,” she told him. “Ritchie and I can handle distracting Cho – let’s go!”

With the Gryffindor goal posts better protected with Ron’s new technique (and Peakes protecting Ron any time he used it), Gryffindor’s lead over Ravenclaw began to multiply. Soon they were a hundred points up – then a hundred and ten – a hundred and twenty – a hundred and thirty –

“SCORE!” yelled Rose. “10 points to Gryffindor!”

The stands were screaming themselves hoarse and the tension on the field was now palpable. If Gryffindor scored ten more points and then caught the Snitch, they would actually *win the Quidditch Cup* –

Cho was taking no chances. Pulling the rest of her team together, she quickly dictated directions to them, before they all went spiraling out onto the field, changing formation. Noel Harwich tailed Katie, their bright hazel eyes flaring in determination as they chased her up and down the field. Katie tried to pass off the Quaffle, but whenever she tried, Harwich blocked her.

Coote prepared to hit a Bludger at Harwich, but Ginny stopped him.

“No! If you aim for Harwich, you might hit Katie!”

Ginny turned to Dean, who was flying several feet away.

“Dean, try the Porskoff Ploy!”

With a nod, Dean sharply turned his broom around and dived right under Katie. When he did, however, he found Orla Quirke tailing him the exact same way that Harwich was stalking Katie. Katie, seeing Dean under her, dropped the Quaffle so he could catch it, but before Dean could reach it, Orla cut him off, snatching the ball and heading back up the field toward Ron. Peakes whacked a Bludger at her, only to have Ashok Khanna fly right in front of him and knock the Bludger right back at him and Ron. Fortunately both Gryffindors were able to evade the heavy black ball before it smashed into one of the pillars surrounding the pitch.

Ron dropped down again in his Starfish and Stick position to whack the Quaffle out of the way. Demelza caught it and blazed back toward the Ravenclaw hoops, but immediately had to contend with Gerald Vickers pursuing her.

‘Cho’s having every one of her players attach themselves to one of ours,’ Ron realized, ‘effectively canceling us out!’

“Ginny!” he shouted at his sister. “They’re mirroring us!”

Ginny’s brown eyes narrowed. “Cho’s making sure we can’t score any more points – well, to the *hell* with that!”

She turned to Katie.

“Come on – if the Ravenclaws want to tail us so closely, then we’ll make them regret it!”

Katie nodded, before zipping back onto the field, Noel Harwich again at her heels.

“Robbins has the Quaffle – oh, hold on, Bell’s zipping up the field – wow, it’s like she’s in a pinball machine! She’s zipping around all over – trying to shake off Harwich, I bet – they’re having trouble keeping up – now Thomas is doing it too, but on the other side of the field, trying to shake off Quirke – oh, I see now, it’s a *distraction*! Thomas has the Quaffle – Quirke’s losing steam – *OUCH*, Quirke’s down by a Bludger originally hit by Guthrie but redirected by Coote – and Gryffindor scores! 10 points to Gryffindor!”

Gryffindor’s stands were pulsing with excitement, jumping up and down and screaming. And it

was as everyone was going mad that Ginny saw a tiny flare of gold streaking just above the Ravenclaw goal posts.

She and Cho, having seen the Golden Snitch at the same time, both took off like a flash. Stewart Ackerley, who was already protecting the Ravenclaw goal posts, tried to swerve out of the way so that his Captain could reach the Snitch, but in the process Dean scored another goal.

“10 points to Gryffindor!” cried Rose.

Cho didn’t hesitate in the least, however. Her focus still squarely on the Snitch, she stretched out her hand, leaning over her broom as she reached –

At the last possible minute, Ginny swerved up from below, balancing herself in a weak standing position on top of her broom for just enough seconds to reach up and snatch the Snitch right under Cho’s nose.

Unfortunately the Snitch could offer no kind of support against gravity. Wobbling sharply, Ginny balanced precariously for only a second before she fell off right her broom. She frantically contorted as she tumbled downward, just barely catching the broom handle with one knee. Swaying violently in mid-air, she held the Snitch over her head even as she hanged upside down off of her broom.

“GINNY WEASLEY HAS CAUGHT THE SNITCH!” Rose shouted, as the entire crowd exploded. “GRYFFINDOR WINS! RA -- wait -- wait, so -- OH MY GOD, I CAN’T BELIEVE IT, *GRYFFINDOR WINS THE QUIDDITCH CUP! OH MY GOD!*”

Dean, Demelza and Katie flew over to support Ginny and help her to the ground, even as they were all grabbing onto her and sobbing tears of joy. Peakes and Coote hit the four of them in mid-air with two hard *THUMPS*, shouting at the top of their lungs in excitement. By the time the rest of the team touched the ground, Ron had joined them too, reaching over to pull Ginny off of her broom and yank her into a huge hug. With some difficulty, he folded his numb fingers around his younger sister’s wrist and lifted her arm up over both their heads to show off the glittering Golden Snitch clutched fast between her fingers.

“YEAH!” Ron bellowed. “*YEAAAAH!*”

The Gryffindors in the stands all poured onto the field, running to the side of their team. At the

front were Hermione and Bridget, who dashed past the others and threw their arms around Ron and Ginny, respectively.

“I’m so *proud* of you, Ron!” said Hermione breathlessly, tears streaming down her face. “You did *so* well!”

Ron squeezed her tightly, reveling in the warmth of her arms. When he looked up, he saw the Ravenclaw team had returned to the ground too. Despite the frustration and disappointment in their expressions, Cho still gave Ron a soft smile and a thumbs-up.

Ron returned the gesture, smiling broadly and tears welling up in his eyes, as the singing and cheering crowd descended upon them. A weeping Professor McGonagall passed Ginny and Ron the golden Quidditch Cup, and the Gryffindor team held it aloft over their heads, beaming with pride and utter relief.

‘Just wait until Harry finds out,’ Ron thought proudly, *‘just wait...!’*

The Two Meetings

Harry had indeed been thrilled when he found out about Gryffindor's victory over Ravenclaw – so thrilled, in fact, that he kissed Ginny in the middle of the stuffed-to-the-brim, partying Gryffindor common room. And that was how, after months and months of Harry trying to tamp down and hide his feelings for Ginny, the two started dating.

Being open with his feelings for Ginny – and having Ron actually be *okay* with them – had taken a huge burden off of Harry's shoulders and made him feel pounds lighter. It was funny how little his and Ginny's dynamic actually changed; sure, they were snogging a lot more now, but otherwise it felt very much the same as when Harry would visit the Burrow, except it was just the two of them. Ginny and Harry still talked about Quidditch together. They talked about the War and what was going on with the Order. They practiced dueling spells like they did back in the D.A. They made each other laugh. And yet it also felt like there were suddenly fewer walls between them than before – Ginny could guess what was on Harry's mind simply by reading his facial expressions, and Harry no longer felt any reluctance in silently taking Ginny's hand whenever she looked the least bit down.

As much as his relationship with Ginny had brightened up Harry's whole world, however, dark clouds were creeping in. After two more weeks of Potions without any assistance from the Half-Blood Prince, Harry got a rather unsettling note from Hedwig on Thursday.

Harry –

Please meet me in my office at 7:00 Friday evening, after dinner. Our meeting will be private and closed-door.

Gordon Ramsay

"For your grades, no doubt," Hermione said dryly. "I *told* you that you shouldn't have been so reliant on the Pri –"

"Oh, for *Trolls*' sake," Ginny snapped, "lecturing Harry on what he *should've* done isn't going to bloody well help him *now*, and you've already hammered in that one lecture more than enough times – so *shut it*."

Hermione looked a bit miffed at Ginny's harsh shutdown. Ron, although he looked just as disapproving of Hermione's response as Ginny, turned to Harry instead.

“...It *is* probably about class, though, right?” he asked. “Don’t know what else it really *could* be...”

Harry nodded gloomily. “Yeah...last class Ramsay looked like he wanted to *shake* me, he was so frustrated – ”

“Disappointed, more like,” said Ron. “I reckon Ramsay thinks you’re having a rough time of things...you know, since your Potions scores have gone down so badly. He probably just wants to make sure you’re okay, that’s all.”

When Harry bid Ginny, Hermione, and Ron goodbye at the top of the stairs leading down to the dungeons, he felt like a cold, heavy stone was settling into the base of his stomach, dragging it down somewhere in the area of the floor.

Was Ron right? Was Ramsay just going to ask him if he was okay, and then let him go? Ramsay had always been pretty nice to Harry in the past – surely Harry didn’t have a reason to worry...

Yet he worried all the same. He worried all the way down the hall and as he hesitantly entered Ramsay’s empty classroom.

Ramsay was standing at the back of the classroom, just outside his office door. From his posture, Harry guessed Ramsay had arrived only a little while before he had.

“Hello, Harry,” said the Potions professor.

His tone was measured and yet neutral enough that Harry couldn’t tell if he was angry or not, but he certainly seemed less pleasant than usual.

“You...wanted to see me, professor?” Harry said uncomfortably.

“Yes, I did.”

Ramsay indicated his open office door. "After you."

Unable to shake the discomfort off of his shoulders, Harry kept his posture as strong and confident as he could as he walked past Ramsay into the office. Ramsay closed the door behind both of them, before moving behind his desk and sitting down.

"Sit down, Harry."

Reluctantly Harry lowered himself into the chair across the desk from Ramsay. The white-dressed Potions Master considered Harry silently for a short moment, his arms crossed over his chest; then he rested both arms on the desk and leaned forward in his chair.

"...Harry, I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to be completely honest with me," he said brusquely, his blue eyes locked squarely on Harry's face. "Have you been cheating in my class?"

Harry froze.

"No," he said instinctively before he could stop himself.

Ramsay's eyes narrowed slightly upon Harry's face. Harry felt as though his stomach was being tied in knots, but he had no idea how to back-pedal even if he wanted to. If he admitted that he'd been cheating, then he'd have to turn in the Prince's book to Ramsay – Snape would figure out that that book was where he'd found the spell that had hurt Malfoy – Snape would probably retroactively punish him for not having given him the Potions book he'd originally asked for – and the thought of Ramsay knowing Harry was a liar – of Dumbledore and McGonagall and the *whole school* knowing Harry was a cheater – that was *terrifying*...but if Harry *didn't* admit it, would Ramsay expel him? *Could* he expel him?

The minutes dragged on and Harry was struck dumb, unable to figure out how to tell the truth or even if he should. Finally Ramsay exhaled heavily through his nose, straightening up slightly.

"...After the trauma you went through in your duel with Draco, I'd assumed at first that the two of you were, understandably, shaken," he said quietly. "I thought you both would get back in the swing of things after a little while...but these last three weeks, you have suddenly turned into the worst student in the class, with potions so pathetic it's as if you haven't studied the entire

semester.”

“I just – ” Harry said feebly, “I’ve just...had a lot on my mind, lately – ”

“I hope that’s true, Harry,” Ramsay said solemnly, his sharp blue eyes boring into Harry’s face critically. “I *sincerely* hope so.”

There was a cold silence between the two of them, in which Ramsay slowly inched himself to his feet. He towered over Harry, who was still seated.

“...Regardless of what’s going on in your life, I think it’s time you’re reminded of how *important* your schooling is. At present your marks are poor enough that if they do not improve dramatically and soon...I will assign you a failing grade and deny you entry into seventh-year Potions.”

Harry’s heart convulsed in terror. “*What?!?*”

“And as you know,” Ramsay continued harshly, “without passable Potions scores, you *will not* become an Auror. I will *personally* send an owl to the Auror office and make sure they know all about your lack of qualifications.”

Harry sat in horrified, numb silence as Ramsay plowed on.

“If you had admitted to cheating at the start, I would’ve forgiven your mistake and helped you study...but since you’ve made it clear that you were *not* cheating, you should have no difficulty getting your marks up to scratch before our final exam in two weeks – you know, the one I mentioned at the beginning of term, where I give out another bottle of Felix Felicis? If you impress me in the final exam, I will give you a grade that will allow you to continue Potions next year. If not...well, I’m sorry, but I’m afraid you’ll just have to find another career path.”

Ramsay’s expression was harder than Harry had ever seen it as he crossed his arms.

“Oh...and if you think admitting to any wrong-doing now will change my mind, I’m afraid it’s too late for that. You’ve made your choice – now you’ll need to deal with the consequences and put in the work by yourself.”

Harry felt as though all of his strength had abandoned him. Surely all of the color had drained out of his face – maybe even his entire face had gone as pale and translucent as a ghost, given by how cold he suddenly felt...

“...Yes, sir,” he said, his voice such a weak shadow of its usual self it was like he really had become a ghost.

Ramsay’s sharp blue eyes bore into Harry for another moment, before he migrated over to his office door and opened it again.

“You may go.”

Slowly turning around to look up at the open door, Harry shakily got to his feet and slumped through the open door. He could feel Ramsay’s eyes on his back as he shuffled out of the classroom, feeling as though he was slowly melting deeper and deeper into the floor with every step out of the dungeons and back up the stairs toward the Gryffindor common room. Harry wasn’t even sure if he’d make it up there, given by how deep underground he suddenly felt.

About a half hour later, another figure migrated slowly down the hallway toward the Potions classroom.

Draco Malfoy had also received a letter from Ramsay requesting a meeting. Draco frankly didn’t know what it was for, and he told himself he didn’t care – after all, he’d had little interest in Ramsay’s class earlier in the year, just as he’d had little interest in his other classes. None of his classes felt all that important anymore, now that his father was in Azkaban – Mr. Malfoy had always been the one to push Draco to do well in school, not just because he expected Draco to do well, but because Draco *wanted* to do well. His father was *proud* when he did well in school – he made his father look good, when he did well –

But nothing Draco could do could make Mr. Malfoy look good anymore – not since Potter and his stupid friends and the Order of the Phoenix and that Muggle lover Dumbledore got him caught at the Ministry. Now *everyone* had turned against Mr. Malfoy and his family, at the drop of a hat – everyone had turned against Mr. Malfoy...everyone had turned against Draco, too. The Slytherin Quidditch team had abandoned him after he quit, Crabbe and Goyle had lost all respect for him... even Pansy had finally gotten fed up with him not telling her anything and would probably only forgive him now if he went back to how he’d been before...and Draco knew there was no going

back. It was impossible to go back. He was one of the Dark Lord's servants now – that meant he was in the same boat as Mr. Malfoy – people would only accept his presence so long as they didn't know the truth about who he was...what he was wrapped in...

“I know that despite what the Prophet says, you're not your father, and his crimes aren't yours.”

Draco shoved the words and the dark-haired face with piercing blue eyes that accompanied it out of his mind.

'Idealistic twit,' he thought dully. *'She thinks all I've ever done is have a laugh about people – she doesn't know what I've done...what I have to do...'*

Hating that he'd even given Daphne's brat sister a single thought, Draco walked through the Potions classroom, coming to a stop just outside the doorway of Ramsay's office.

Ramsay was sitting at his desk grading papers, but as soon as Draco approached, he looked up.

“Draco – good of you to come. Close the door and sit down.”

Although he had no interest in doing anything of the sort, Draco bit his tongue and halfheartedly obeyed, pulling the office door closed behind him and then slowly settling down on the very edge of the chair that he was offered.

With a flick of his wand, Ramsay levitated a plate full of what looked like chocolate truffles from a side table and plopped them down gently on the wood between them.

“Help yourself,” Ramsay said politely.

Draco glanced down at them, forcing the disdain from his face as best he was able and projecting his best unreadable, stony expression.

“No thank you,” he said stiffly.

Ramsay didn't seem the least bit unsettled by the rejection; it was almost as if he'd expected it. Instead he merely rested his hands down on his desk, interlacing the fingers.

"...Draco, as I'm sure you know, your marks have been consistently poor in my class."

Draco really wanted to roll his eyes, but he didn't.

"Professor Snape spoke very highly of your abilities before term started, but I'll be honest, I'm anything but impressed," continued Ramsay. "If your marks don't improve, then I'm afraid you won't be able to continue Potions next year."

Draco raised his eyebrows dully; then, crossing his arms, he leaned back in his chair, looking at Ramsay with the most condescending of looks.

"...And?" he asked coolly. "With all due respect, *professor*, you're telling me things I already know – so unless there's anything else, I'll be going now."

"As it happens," said Ramsay lowly, "there is."

Draco had been preparing to leave, but at Ramsay's words, he stilled, before slowly descending back down on the chair. Ramsay's blue eyes narrowed seriously, and he leaned forward slightly in his chair, considering his next words carefully.

"...Draco, I know you're going through some difficult things right now – "

Draco couldn't fight back a scoff.

"*Do* you?" he sneered sarcastically. "Well, look here, old Dumbledore hired a right *genius* – where'd you hear about my little sob story, the *Daily Prophet*?"

To his credit, Ramsay didn't take Draco's bait.

"I know because I also had to grow up way too fast at sixteen," the professor said sharply. "Sure,

my father was not in Azkaban – but I know the feeling of having a parent who you love so much, and yet is so flawed as a human being – ”

“You don’t know *anything* about my father,” Draco snapped before he could stop himself.

“I know more than enough of him,” Ramsay said quietly. “Lucius left Hogwarts before I arrived, but I remember him back in those days, as well as his ‘*friends*’ amongst the Death Eaters – Kasper Crabbe – Jeremias Goyle – Bellatrix Black – Rodolphus and Rabastian Lestrangle, Alecto and Amycus Carrow – I remember how all of them came up one by one to face the Wizengamot...how some of them escaped the first time, and others didn’t...”

Draco felt his fists clenching. He tried desperately to hold his temper in, but it felt like Ramsay was egging him on. He *had* to be egging him on – that soft voice he was using, feigning *sympathy* – it was just a knife he was having fun twisting into Draco’s back –

“And there’s something I realized, about the people who escaped Azkaban the first time,” said Ramsay. “All of them had one thing in common.”

“What?” spat Draco.

Ramsay’s mouth spread into a very tiny, odd smile.

“*Family*. Every last one of them had a spouse and a child whom they loved unconditionally. The ones who didn’t – the Lestranges, the Carrows – who only ever obsessed over You-Know-Who and his demented beliefs and never learned what love really means – were too inhuman to ever be pitied. No one thought *they* could’ve been innocent – that they had good in them.”

Draco stared at Ramsay, perfectly baffled. Ramsay leaned forward enough to rest his chin on his folded hands over the desk.

“Obviously I don’t know everything you’re going through, Draco, I’m not so arrogant as to claim that,” he said. “But I know better than anyone how it feels to be a young man being pressured by the adults around you to join a war that you’re not ready to fight in. I have still not forgiven Dumbledore for trying to recruit me to the Order, back when I was too young to understand what I was signing my life away to – even if I had *so* wanted to join the war effort at first, I realized more and more how much I wanted nothing to do with it as things got worse...and given your family’s allegiance, I’m quite sure you’ve felt the pressure to follow in your father’s footsteps, once you

graduate. *That's* why you think nothing matters, isn't it – because you don't think you'll have a future, outside the War you'll have to fight?"

Draco's heart was beating very fast now. He tried so, *so* hard not to say anything – no matter how much anger pulsed through his veins, or how much fear thumped in his chest, or how much part of him ached and screamed about how true the words were – !

Ramsay considered Draco with a sympathetic eye.

"...You don't have to do everything alone, Draco," he said. "If you need help, I will help you – all you have to do is ask."

It was that kindness that made Draco finally snap. He got up, his face very pale and his gray eyes blazing with unrestrained hatred as he got right up in Ramsay's face.

"Who says I'd ever want your help, you – you *filthy Mudblood!*?"

Somehow, however...even his fiercest, cruelest, most hate-filled words sounded almost pathetic ringing in his ears.

Ramsay's posture had stiffened visibly at the insult. He stared Draco down, even as the pale sixth year panted heavily and glared viciously, and his sharp blue eyes remained oddly composed despite the fire therein. Then, finally, Ramsay broke eye contact, rising to his feet slowly.

"...Very well, Draco. You've made your point clear."

He walked slowly over to his office door. Draco stood frozen in front of the desk, unable to shift his posture in the slightest however much he wanted to. The door to the office opened with a quiet *creak*.

"You may go," said Ramsay.

Draco finally forced himself to turn around. He strode back over to the door, avoiding Ramsay's eyes pointedly.

“Regardless of your position, my offer still stands,” Ramsay said lowly as Draco walked past him and out of the office. “Oh, and for the record...perhaps my blood may be dirty in your mind...but at least my name is pristine.”

Ramsay's Test

Harry had been very reluctant to tell Ron and especially Hermione about what Ramsay had told him that evening, but after a while of them ganging up on him, he broke down and told them everything.

Hermione, to her credit, did not take the opportunity to scold Harry again; instead she immediately moved into “*fix-it*” mode.

“If you’re going to pass Potions, we’ve *got* to get you ready for that final exam,” she said firmly. “I suppose one nice thing is you no longer have Quidditch to worry about, so we can put all our attention on preparing for it – I’ll go ahead and draw up some studying schedules with specific focus on Potions...then Ron and I can help you study...”

The very next day, the three Gryffindors started studying Potions together every afternoon in the library. Unfortunately neither Ron nor Hermione were very good at actually *teaching* the material. Hermione would recite entire passages from the textbook in an attempt to describe the chemical effects between hemlock and beetle’s eyes, but Harry found himself tuning out after a while instead of following any of it. Ron was a little better, as he’d gotten some tutoring sessions with Ramsay, but he was still rather behind on the material himself, so he was unable to answer certain questions.

“Well, the way Ramsay described it, billywig stings tend to make a potion thinner – I guess because when you get stung by a billywig, you tend to float,” Ron explained during their third day of studying. “So if you’ve got to make a potion thicker, you’ll need to counteract the stings with a bit of Mandrake root...”

“Why would you need to make a potion thicker?” asked Harry.

Ron smiled sheepishly, glancing over at Hermione for an answer. “Um...”

“A potion’s thickness is in direct proportion to the robustness of the potion’s effects,” Hermione answered promptly without looking up from the notes she was shuffling through.

Ron turned back to Harry uncomfortably.

“...There you go, then,” he muttered, unable to bite back his sarcasm.

Harry frowned.

“Basically a thicker potion will last longer and have stronger effects,” said a low voice from behind them.

The three Gryffindors all looked up, startled. Millicent Bulstrode had settled down at the table next to theirs, her back to them and her gaze locked on her own open textbook rather than on them.

“Oh,” said Harry awkwardly. “...Thanks.”

Millicent slightly inclined her head in a nod without looking up from her book.

“I’m surprised you forgot that, Potter,” she said dryly, “considering how happy Ramsay was when you remembered to compensate for the natural thinning of the Wiggenswald Potion by adding in that salamander blood.”

“Ah, well,” Harry said uncomfortably, trying to tamp down the embarrassed flush moving up his face, “I was just...*experimenting*, back then...I didn’t really know it did that...”

Whether Millicent believed this or not Harry couldn’t tell. Regardless, she continued to speak to him without turning around.

“If all you can do is make good guesses, that’s *really* going to show on the final exam,” she said. “Ramsay’s said he’s not going easy on us.”

Her brown eyes had drifted over her shoulder even though she was still facing away.

“No disrespect to you, Weasley...Granger...but from the sound of things, Potter needs some *real* tutoring, not just review. Simple studying’s not going to cut it this late in the game, if you don’t understand what you’re studying in the first place.”

Ron quirked an eyebrow at Millicent; then he smirked slightly.

“...Is this you volunteering to help, then?”

Millicent stiffened, hunching over defensively like she had been slapped on the back. “What?”

“Well, *you’re* really good at Potions,” Ron said smoothly. “Slughorn himself said he hadn’t seen a Pepper-Up Potion in years that was as good as the one you made for our soup...and from the sound of things, you understand the material well enough to explain it.”

“I don’t *explain* things to people,” Millicent answered dully.

“You just did literally thirty seconds ago.”

“Don’t try to be clever, Weasley, you’ll embarrass yourself.”

Ron snorted with laughter. Millicent, despite herself, found herself smiling a little too, but she hid it well by bowing her head over the book in front of her.

“If...if you’d be willing to help, Millicent, we’d *really* appreciate it,” said Hermione shyly. “Harry can’t become an Auror unless he passes Potions...and as much as I hate to admit it, I don’t think Ron and I are helping that much...”

Harry looked down at the books set up in front of him, nodding in begrudging agreement.

Millicent considered the matter for a moment. Finally, after a long moment, she spoke again, very levelly and lowly.

“...If you really need help, Potter, I’ll tutor you – on three conditions.”

“And what are those?” asked Harry hesitantly.

“One: you won’t tell anyone that I’m tutoring you – except perhaps your girlfriend, no sense in her

thinking we're *seeing* each other or something stupid. Two: I'll expect a salary of one Galleon per session – I know that's something you can afford, and I could use some extra pocket change to buy a new cat next year. Three: your *Prefect friends* will reward Slytherin house fifty points for my generosity," she said with a broad smirk over her shoulder in Ron's direction.

Ron raised an eyebrow at Hermione, his lips touched with a wry smile. Hermione, despite the disapproving frown on her face, gave a reluctant sigh and nodded.

"Deal," said Harry.

The very next day Harry started his tutoring sessions with Millicent in the Hogwarts kitchens. The whole experience was a touch surreal – Harry was glad that he never had to try saying the sentence "*I'm being tutored in Potions by Millicent Bulstrode*" out loud to anyone, because he felt like he'd get shut up in a mental ward in three seconds.

To Harry's surprise, though, Millicent was a pretty good tutor. Her manner of speaking was very short and brusque, but because of that, she kept her points very succinct and simple to follow. Rather than just explain the potions theoretically, she made Harry brew the potions as she explained each concept, including adding in ingredients that made potions explode or melt through the cauldrons in order to make her point.

"Not going to forget not to mix erumpent tail with snake fangs again, now are you?" Millicent said coolly as Harry nursed several minor burns on his fingers.

She took out a bottle of clear lavender-colored potion and, applying it to a small towel Winky had provided for them, handed it to Harry. Harry took the cloth, running it over each of his fingers in turn so that the burns slowly started to fade.

"So what have we learned?" Millicent asked him.

Harry frowned slightly. "...Aggressive ingredients don't mix."

"Unless?"

“Unless you also add in a mediating ingredient.”

Millicent nodded. “So what sort of ingredient could we have added before adding the snake fangs, as a cushion?”

Harry considered his options. Honeywater would water down the ingredients, and make them less volatile, but then the effects of the potion would also become more muted. Fluxweed was a good “palette cleanser” between ingredients, but it tended to magnify whatever ingredient was added after it...

“...Would peppermint work?” asked Harry.

Millicent blinked, a bit taken aback.

“...I guess it could,” she granted, raising an eyebrow. “But why would you want to use that?”

“Ramsay used it to counteract the rue in the Felix Felicis earlier in the year,” Harry said slowly. “Rue can be sort of bitter...so I reckon peppermint sort of balances that out, right?”

Millicent’s expression softened just slightly – she wasn’t *smiling* exactly, but she was clearly pleased by Harry’s response.

“*Exactly* right. Peppermint is a soothing plant – it’s great for getting rid of nasty side effects, without canceling out any of the effects a potion’s supposed to have. It’s not usually mixed in the *middle* of potions...but that doesn’t mean it isn’t an option.”

Millicent cleared out the remnants of the messed-up potion in their cauldron so they could start again.

“Let’s try the Elixir to Induce Euphoria again – this time, we’ll try stirring the potion both clockwise and counter-clockwise, and go over which one works better and why.”

Harry's first Elixir to Induce Euphoria ended up making him double over in fits of hysterical laughter that Millicent only reversed with a bottle of antidote after watching Harry squirm around on the floor for a good five minutes. Then she got to work explaining stirring directions.

"When trying to *blend* the ingredients, you stir clockwise. When trying to *separate* the ingredients, you stir counterclockwise – pretend that the two ingredients are misbehaving and you're breaking them up before they get in a big fight."

Harry considered the potion bubbling in the cauldron, stirring once counterclockwise and then reaching for the unicorn hair. "Then you can add in other ingredients to balance them out, while they're separate?"

"Yeah."

Harry smiled wryly. "...You know, Millicent, you'd be a great Potions teacher."

Millicent gave a great snort. "Sorry, but I have other plans."

Harry raised an eyebrow at her curiously.

"My parents expect me to take on their legal business after I graduate," Millicent explained as she shifted the cauldron over a little and added in a pinch of honeywater. "They serve as defense attorneys, in trials held by the Wizengamot."

Harry was reminded of his own experience with the Wizengamot, when he was tried for using underage magic the previous year. Dumbledore had served as his representative during the trial and had prepared a full-scale defense well ahead of time. Harry tried to imagine himself facing down the entire Wizengamot by himself and couldn't help but be intimidated by the thought.

"Do you *want* to do that?" he asked, feeling a bit of pity.

"Yeah," said Millicent matter-of-factly. "I'll just have my own way of doing things, when I take it over."

“Like what?”

“Taking different clients. Mother and Father have always attracted shady, rich clients – old *friends* who need a favor. I’d shift our focus to being public defenders – help out clients like small business owners or house elves who can’t afford good representation normally.”

Harry felt a rush of admiration despite himself. “That’s cool.”

“Well, given our past dealings, we’ve saved up enough that we can more than afford some charity,” Millicent said with a dismissive shrug, “at least until our improved reputation earns us a profit. And besides, the Ministry needs a good kick in the pants; we may as well give it to them. That’s why you’re going for the Auror Department, rather than teaching Defense like you did in that club last year, isn’t it?”

Harry nodded. It was so strange thinking about the D.A. now – just last year, Millicent was part of Umbridge’s Inquisitorial Squad, and now here she was, teaching him Potions...

Millicent took out a vial and sampled the potion she and Harry had just brewed.

“All right, let’s test it.”

“If I fall onto the ground contorting with laughter again, will you please give me the antidote a little more quickly this time?” Harry asked coolly.

Millicent smirked slightly. “Fine.”

Millicent and Harry continued their sessions every night until exams began in the second week of June. By the time they were finished, Harry actually felt hopeful about his chances. Sure, there was a lot he still needed to master (as Millicent frequently reminded him), but he still felt like he had a better handle on what he was doing than he had before.

When the day of the Potions exam came, Harry tried his very best to stay optimistic. It was a little easier when Ginny spent all of breakfast helping him review the notes Hermione had written for him, which were in retrospect quite a bit easier to read now that Harry could refer back to one of the potions he'd made explode in his sessions with Millicent. By the time breakfast was over and Harry, Ron, and Hermione had to head to the exam, Harry felt quite a bit lighter, particularly when Ginny gave him a long, warm kiss to wish him luck.

“*Ugh*, please, for the love of Merlin, *don't* do that again when I'm within viewing range,” Ron grumbled good-naturedly to Harry as they and Hermione headed downstairs to the dungeons.

When they arrived in the Potions classroom, they found the rest of the Gryffindors and Slytherins, including Millicent, already waiting. Millicent and Harry exchanged glances but did not verbally address each other as Ramsay entered the room and strode up to the front of the class.

“Welcome, sixth years,” pronounced Ramsay, clapping his hands together in front of him. “Today your test will be a singularly difficult challenge – to brew a potion without a recipe. This potion is one we've discussed, but never brewed before, and you won't find it anywhere in our textbook.”

The students nervously sneaked glances at each other.

“Amortentia,” Ramsay finished with a satisfied smile. “As Hermione called it at the beginning of term, ‘*the most powerful love potion in the world.*’ I will bring you up, one by one, into my office, and you will brew your best attempt at the potion for me. And as a reminder, the person who shows the most improvement from the Draught of the Living Death they turned into me at the beginning of the year...will receive *this*.”

Ramsay reached into his white robes and held up another tiny vial of glittering, bronze-colored Felix Felicis. All of the students, even Malfoy, straightened up visibly.

“When you're done with your exam, you will leave the classroom, so that your classmates have a chance to do it themselves,” said Ramsay. “We'll be going alphabetically by last name...so Millicent love, you're first.”

Straightening up slightly, Millicent set her jaw, and then slowly followed Ramsay into his office. Ramsay closed the door behind them with a quiet *snap*, leaving the rest of the students alone to wait.

It was grueling, watching each student go up one by one. When Millicent came out of Ramsay's office, she looked a little pale, but predictably stoic. When Tracey Davis came out, she put on her best confident smirk, but it was clearly trembling. When Hermione came out, she looked frazzled; she wanted to tell Ron and Harry how it had gone, but Ramsay cleared his throat pointedly when she opened her mouth to speak to them, and Hermione obediently left the room, while Ramsay turned to Daphne with a smile, escorting her into his office and closing the door behind them.

Malfoy's turn followed Daphne's; he strode after Ramsay with his best attempt at his usual swagger, and although it wasn't fully convincing, he did at least manage to keep his nerves from his face. The exam itself was very taciturn and tense, with Malfoy only speaking when Ramsay asked him a question about what he was brewing. When his potion was complete, it didn't have the clear consistency it needed, but he could still make out the familiar smells of the ocean and boysenberry punch. As he left the office, he kept his expression purposefully stony, ignoring Pansy when she tried to catch his eye and fumed furiously upon him ignoring her.

After Eloise Midgen, Pansy, and Parvati, it was Harry's turn. Ron gave him an encouraging thumbs-up as Harry followed Ramsay into his office and came to stand in front of Ramsay's desk, where a cauldron and a whole bunch of ingredients were laid out.

'Okay...' Harry thought, his eyes running over the ingredients as Ramsay came to sit behind his desk and watch, *'first we'll need something strong that we can add onto...'*

He reached for the salamander blood, pouring it into the cauldron. Then he pulled a few other ingredients closer to him – moon dew, lacewing flies, Lady's Mantle, dandelion root, and horklump juice – and started adding them in little by little. As he worked, Harry felt Ramsay's sharp blue eyes boring into him.

"Why Lady's Mantle?" Ramsay asked abruptly.

"Huh?"

Harry looked up, startled.

"Keep working," said Ramsay briskly. "But tell me why you added Lady's Mantle."

Awkwardly Harry picked up the bottle of dandelion root and began adding it, stirring the potion twice clockwise.

“...Lady’s Mantle’s used in beautification potions,” he mumbled.

“And?” prompted Ramsay.

“And...” Harry continued uncomfortably as he poured in the horklump juice, “Amortentia is supposed to be an *obsession* potion, not a love potion – since love can’t really be made into a potion – so it’s supposed to make you see the person as really attractive, right? So – ”

Abruptly his potion gave a terrible *hiss*, fizzling multicolored, foul-smelling smoke. Panic rising in his chest, Harry quickly stirred the potion twice counterclockwise and, grabbing a sprig of peppermint, tossed it in. In a moment, the potion quieted, losing most of its color and turning a cool gray.

“Nice save,” Ramsay said dryly.

Harry looked up at him; to his relief, the Potions professor was smiling as he brought the cauldron with the gray potion inside closer to him so he could examine it.

“Peppermint was a very good choice,” he said, spooning out some of the potion to get a better look at it.

Harry’s own face spread into a smile. “...Well, I got it from you.”

Ramsay’s blue eyes twinkled as he put the spoon down. “Would you like to know where *I* got it from?”

Blinking in slight surprise, Harry nodded.

“Your mother,” said Ramsay. “We were both in Horace’s Slug Club back in the day, thanks to our skill in potions. Lily and Horace were the first people who really encouraged me to pursue potions...and my cooking...so I guess, in a way, it’s thanks to them that I’m who I am today.”

Ramsay brought his hands down onto the desk, leaning forward slightly.

“I’m glad that you’re finally getting it, Harry,” he said, his voice mutedly proud. “Don’t get me wrong, now, your potion is all off – I wouldn’t even let a *garden gnome* sample it...but you obviously put in a lot of work and used your head.”

Harry’s heart hopped into his throat. “So – so you won’t fail me?”

“No, Harry – I won’t fail you. Again, your potion probably won’t get you a high grade...but you’ve earned a second chance.”

Harry grinned so widely it felt like his face was going to crack like china as he left the room. He couldn’t tell Ron anything of what had happened inside yet, so he strode to the outside hallway to meet with Hermione and excitedly tell her what had happened. Then they told Ron everything when he joined them.

When everyone was done, Blaise Zabini and Ramsay came out into the hall to summon the class back inside. The students all sat at their assigned desks while Ramsay returned to the head of the class.

“First of all, congratulations to all of you,” Ramsay began. “I still need to assign individual grades – but I’ll reassure you now that you all passed the exam.”

The entire class exhaled in immense relief.

“Some of your potions came close, and some were far off the mark – but that, in the end, is not what mattered. What mattered were the choices you made and why you made them. You used your own intuition about what ingredients you should use and how you should brew them based on what sort of potion you intended to make. That is a skill even the most talented of Potioneers take a long time to develop, let alone perfect, and you’re all well on your way to mastering it, if you put in the proper amount of work in the future.”

With a wry smile, Ramsay took the vial of Felix Felicis back out of his robes.

“But, of course...I’m sure all of you are dying to know who won. The student who earned this did not make the best potion today...but he impressed me all the same, more than any other student.

That student is...Draco Malfoy.”

Everyone reacted with visible shock, including Malfoy.

“Congratulations, Draco,” said Ramsay, offering the tiny bottle to Draco with a soft smile. “You really tried today...and I couldn’t be happier to see such effort, believe me.”

Malfoy stared down at the vial for a moment, disbelieving. He took it quickly, holding it close to his chest and staring at it, almost as if he thought Ramsay was going to swipe it back. Then, very slowly, his face spread into a strange, fragile, almost manic smile. It twisted his pale face unnaturally – almost like Malfoy had forgotten how to smile and so he was having trouble figuring out what muscles did what. Then almost as quickly the smile faltered and died, leaving his face twitching.

“Thank you, sir,” he mumbled, his voice very hushed and his stormy gray eyes locked on the tiny bottle in his hand.

Ramsay noticed the bizarreness of Malfoy’s expression but did not appear concerned; instead he merely nodded kindly. “You’re welcome.”

He turned to the class.

“Well...so long for the year, everyone! It’s been fun – and make sure you study up for next year; seventh year is a huge handful to deal with, I assure you...”

As the class filed out, though, Ron turned to Harry and Hermione, his mouth twisted into a deep frown.

“Harry,” he said lowly, “I hate to say it, but...maybe you were onto something, when you said Malfoy’s acting a little weird...”

Dumbledore's Request

Everyone seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief when exams ended, none more so than Colin, Ginny, and the other fifth years finally completing their OWLS. The last week of term soon arrived, and everyone started their usual packing-up in anticipation of the Hogwarts Express returning them home at the end of the week. Most people were taking the remaining time to relax and spend time with their friends; one of the few exceptions was Arjuna, who missed the last meeting of the cooking club Sunday afternoon because she was sick in bed.

“Her fever’s been so bad that she hasn’t been able to sleep at all for two days,” explained Astoria, looking concerned. “Whenever she tries, she ends up having these awful night terrors that make her wake up in a cold sweat. I told her to lie down and try to rest today...I reckon we can go see Madame Pomfrey in the morning, if she’s still not feeling better...”

By Sunday evening Ramsay had just finished grading the last of his students’ exams when he was interrupted by a knock on his office door.

“Come in,” he called without looking up from his papers.

The door opened with a quiet *squeak*. Once Ramsay was finished with the line he was working on, he looked up, to see Professor McGonagall striding into the room.

“An owl arrived in the Great Hall with a letter for you,” said the Deputy Headmistress demurely, holding out an envelope. “From your fiancée, I would assume – I thought to bring it downstairs, so that the owl wouldn’t go flapping down the hallways searching for you.”

Ramsay grinned as he took the letter from McGonagall, his eyes running over the front. “...Yep, that is Tana’s handwriting. Much obliged.”

McGonagall nodded politely. “There is one other matter...the Headmaster asked to see you in his office, after you’re done with your work this evening. I daresay he thinks to ask about your continued employment.”

The tone the sentence ended on, as well as McGonagall’s curiously raised eyebrow, signaled to Ramsay that she was wondering about that as well. Ramsay smiled wryly.

“Well, I suppose if Dumbledore hasn’t found someone suitable enough to take my place – someone who *isn’t* Severus Snape, mind you – I could be persuaded to return. Though I’d have to discuss the matter over with Tana first – she’s spent a good chunk of an entire year without me, I don’t know how she’d do with another.”

McGonagall’s lips spread into a dewy smile. “Yes, I’m afraid romance is not well-suited to professorship, by and large.”

She turned on her heel and headed for the door. Before leaving, however, she looked back over her shoulder.

“...Gordon...I know your reasons for not joining the Order, and I understand them – I didn’t join up during the First War either, given my undercover work with the Ministry. But I must be honest, we could really use your help. Hestia’s been trying hard to track a small group of Guilders who’ve tried kidnapping random Muggles and pressing them into their service...and Remus has been undercover for almost a year, yet he’s hardly sent any word out in the last two months...”

Ramsay’s eyes narrowed upon his desk. The thought of Remus Lupin – the Gryffindor prefect who’d shared chocolate bars with his classmates when they were down – being in trouble made the chef’s stomach crumple up in his chest as if it were made of paper.

“Minerva, the Order is still trying to indoctrinate *children* into their ranks,” he said sharply. “You can’t expect me to accept that. I’m frankly shocked that you do.”

“Those ‘*children*’ are legal adults,” McGonagall said reproachfully, turning more fully back around. “Nymphadora Tonks – Fleur Delacour – Bill, Charlie, Fred, and George Weasley – they may be young, but they are more than willing and capable enough to fight. And given how starved we’ve been in finding people who are willing to fight He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, we need all the help we can get.”

“And Harry?” Ramsay challenged her. “Has Dumbledore not been grooming *him* to run out onto his battlefield too?”

McGonagall straightened up to her full, impressive height.

“Potter is following Dumbledore out of his own *choice*, Gordon,” she said, her stern voice ringing with righteousness. “And regardless of how much you or I might worry for Potter’s safety, we have

no right to make his choices for him. If nothing else...Potter has more than proven himself capable in fighting the Dark Arts over the course of the last five years.”

“That doesn’t mean he *should*,” said Ramsay, crossing his arms stubbornly.

McGonagall sighed.

“I’m afraid things rarely go as they should,” she replied soberly.

With this, she turned and strode out of the classroom, leaving Ramsay alone once again.

Not long later, Ramsay went upstairs to the Headmaster’s office, as Dumbledore had requested. With a mutter of “Acid Pops,” he walked past the gargoyle as it moved out of the way and he climbed the stairs to the open office door.

Dumbledore was already waiting in the tall chair behind his desk, wearing grayish blue robes with long sleeves that ran down his entire arms. There was a black traveling cloak folded up neatly on the left corner of the desk.

“Hello, Gordon,” Dumbledore greeted pleasantly. “Do close the door, would you?”

Ramsay pulled the door closed and strode over, stopping a good foot in front of Dumbledore’s desk.

“You wished to see me?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore quietly, his lips touched with a small smile. “There’s an important matter that we must discuss tonight, before term comes to a close...”

He picked up a glass bowl of toad-shaped chocolates with his uninjured hand and placed it between them on the wood.

“Might I offer you a Peppermint Toad?” he asked mistily. “I seem to recall that they’re your favorite.”

Ramsay raised an eyebrow at Dumbledore suspiciously.

“I know you didn’t call me in here just to offer me candy, you old dodger,” he reproached him. “Don’t beat around the bush.”

Dumbledore smiled almost fondly. “As always, Gordon, I so enjoy your elegant turns of phrase...”

There was something almost bizarrely sad in the Headmaster’s eyes that Ramsay had never seen before. It made him suddenly feel very ill at ease. His sharp blue eyes trailed across the desk, resting on the black traveling cloak in the corner.

“...Are you going somewhere?” Ramsay asked lowly.

“Yes, I’m afraid I am,” said Dumbledore with a sigh. “I wanted to speak with you before my departure. You see, Gordon, the mission I’m undertaking will be a touch perilous...and it’s possible, given my health, that I may not be as up to it as I would have been in the past. Don’t worry,” he said when Ramsay’s eyebrows furrowed, “I won’t be alone.”

Any trace of concern on Ramsay’s face was abruptly buried by scorn.

“Ah yes,” he muttered, “it would be unlike you not to drag someone else along on your dangerous little *play-date*.”

Dumbledore didn’t react with any anger; instead he merely looked solemn.

“Gordon, I called you here because I need a favor of you,” he said quietly. “While I am away, Hogwarts will need all the protection possible.”

“All the more reason for you not to go off chasing Death Eaters and actually *protect* your school,”

Ramsay shot back coldly.

“What I am doing is necessary to protect the school, Gordon, as well as the rest of the Wizarding World.”

“Forgive me if I don’t see how *abandoning your responsibility* is a form of protection.”

Dumbledore rose to his feet, his face becoming graver as he crossed the room to his Pensieve, absently gazing into the swirling basin.

“...The mission I am undertaking will help sabotage Voldemort’s chances of revival, once he is finally slain,” he said simply.

Ramsay flinched in response to the Dark Lord’s name, but otherwise remained stoic.

“*Revival?*” he recurred lowly. “You mean the way he came back the last time?”

Dumbledore nodded. “So long as Voldemort – ” Ramsay flinched again, “ – can keep coming back...no student is safe. *Harry* will never be safe...”

Ramsay’s eyes narrowed.

“So this is about you protecting Harry?” he demanded, his tone betraying some surprise and sympathy despite himself. “Keeping him from facing You-Know-Who?”

Dumbledore looked at Ramsay sadly.

“Alas, Gordon...I’m afraid nothing will prevent that,” he murmured.

Ramsay’s mouth fell open in furious disbelief.

“Wh – of *course* it could be prevented, are you daft?!” he retorted angrily. “Harry might be a capable student, but he’s no match for You-Know-Who! He’s just a *boy*! You *can’t* be stupid enough to think that Harry could take down the most powerful Dark Wizard in the world, just because of some rumors about a blasted *prophecy*!”

“You’re right,” said Dumbledore lightly. “I *don’t* think that just because of the prophecy.”

Ramsay stared at Dumbledore for a moment; his sharp eyes slowly widened.

“...Then there *is* a prophecy.”

“Yes, Gordon, there is,” Dumbledore replied calmly as he withdrew his wand from the inside of his robes.

He poked the liquidy remnants in the Pensieve with his wand. Out of the basin came a bizarre echo of words, clearly recollected in its depths as a murky face swam around it.

“Neither can live while the other survives...”

Ramsay looked down at the Pensieve, trying to catch a better look at the face, but it was already fading away and the sound had stopped. Then his eyes shot back up to Dumbledore and narrowed accusingly.

“Does Harry know about this?”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore. “I told him after the Death Eaters tried to steal it from the Department of Mysteries last year. It was time that he knew.”

“So now you’ve coaxed Harry into thinking he has to fight You-Know-Who, just because of some shite prophecy?” snarled Ramsay. “That’s low even for you, Dumbledore, you fucking –”

“I’ve not coaxed him any such way,” Dumbledore said gravely, his misty tone hinting at just enough sharpness to interrupt Ramsay and no more.

The Headmaster's wrinkled, long-fingered hand slid along the edge of the Pensieve.

"As with all prophecies, Harry's only holds as much value as one gives it," he said quietly, "and Harry is wise enough to have realized that he alone, and no prophecy, can dictate his fate. He is also wise enough to realize that he is the Chosen One not because he was chosen by Fate or destiny...but because Voldemort – " Ramsay fought back another flinch, " – chose to target the Potters...and therefore designated Harry as his greatest foe. And because Harry is such a noble boy – such a *brave* man – he will not hide or cower when faced with such a threat...not when it endangers the people he loves most in the world. If Harry doesn't have a choice...it's merely because there is no other choice that he himself could in good conscience make."

Ramsay opened his mouth to speak, but Dumbledore gently cut him off with a raised hand – subconsciously he'd raised his blackened, injured hand, which halted the words in Ramsay's throat almost immediately when he laid eyes on it.

Dumbledore, feeling some compassion in response to Ramsay's horror, shook his sleeve over his injured hand and lowered it again gracefully.

"...I know I've wronged you in the past, Gordon," he said softly. "When you were a boy, I tried to persuade you, both myself and through your friends, to aid in our cause. You were such a brilliant young student...one that I knew could be *so* beneficial to our cause...that I looked past your feelings and wishes in an attempt to recruit you. I exploited your trust in me as an authority figure and used it to coax you to join the Order, without giving you the chance to come to your own conclusions...and for that, I'm sorry."

Dumbledore's words sounded so sincere that they were almost painful to hear. How much that apology would have meant, just three years ago – but right now, Ramsay felt his hands clenching at his sides with anger.

"Yet you're still coaxing more children to fight once they've graduated?" he challenged him sharply. "Ron – Hermione – Ginny, Harry – you can't tell me you don't expect *them* to jump into the fight, just like James and Lily and Alice did! And look at what *fucking* happened to them! You haven't learned a *bloody* thing, have you!?"

Dumbledore's eyes widened just slightly; then they softened with something like pity.

"...You truly love those children."

“No shit, you brainless donkey!” scoffed Ramsay loudly. “Katie nearly *died* thanks to that cursed necklace – Ron got poisoned so badly that he was almost permanently *paralyzed* – Draco has *clearly* been pressured to join the Death Eaters after school, and I’m sure Vincent, Gregory, Millicent, and Daphne will soon be approached too – they’re being pulled into this goddamn War from both sides, and instead of *protecting* them, you’ve just sat back and fucking *let it happen*! All the students at this school – *all* of them – deserve better than this! But I suppose I shouldn’t have expected someone as fucking brain-dead as *you* to understand that! After all, who cares what casualties we suffer or how many families get ripped apart, as long as we win the bloody war - it's all for the *greater fucking good*, isn't it, you mewling, heartless harpie?!”

Dumbledore smiled slightly, but even that smile was tinged with the same bizarre sorrow that so troubled Ramsay.

“...Gordon...your compassion is truly limitless. To care so deeply for these children, many of whom are just as flawed as the adults who’ve raised them and who they’ll likely eventually emulate – to see yourself in every single one of them, however different they might be...that is a singularly impressive feat. I could only *dream* of possessing such a strong heart – one who can bring out friendships where there were once rivalries and who can show such astounding mercy for someone who has yet to earn it. But alas, my heart is too old, battered, and bruised to ever grow to such a size. There was a point, I must confess...where I hesitated in contacting you for the position of Potions professor. Now I see how very right the decision truly was, after all.”

With this he walked back to his desk, leaving Ramsay stunned into silence. After a moment, Dumbledore turned back to look at the Potions professor.

“After all these years, I know that you would never fight for me...but...for *Harry*, surely – for all of Hogwarts – would you fight Voldemort?”

Ramsay flinched at the name, though less this time. He didn’t reply for a long minute; when he finally opened his mouth to speak again, he was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Enter,” said Dumbledore.

The door opened, to reveal Harry on the other side of it. He looked up at Ramsay, startled by his presence.

“Hello, Harry,” Dumbledore said pleasantly. “Gordon and I were just finishing up...Gordon, if you

would excuse us, please.”

Ramsay looked from Dumbledore to over at Harry, his sharp blue eyes wary. His gaze lingered on Harry’s face, as if silently searching for an explanation that never appeared. Finally, with another quick glance toward Dumbledore’s desk, Ramsay left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

About ten minutes later, Harry ran up to the Gryffindor commonroom to fetch his Invisibility Cloak. While there, he took the remaining half of his Felix Felicis out of his suitcase and gave it to Ron, instructing him and Hermione to split it amongst themselves and Ginny and contact the rest of the D.A. if anything went wrong that night.

About thirty minutes after Harry and Dumbledore had left, Draco Malfoy disobeyed curfew and sneaked out of the Slytherin commonroom without anyone noticing.

About an hour and a half after Harry and Dumbledore had left, the students and teachers were all settled in bed when the first rounds of small explosions woke them up from their slumber.

The Battle of the Lightning-Struck Tower

The only person who moved a muscle during that first minute was the castle caretaker, Argus Filch. He'd heard the disturbance coming from the fifth floor corridor, which was just upstairs from where he'd be making his usual evening rounds. Grumbling about Peeves and his theatrical pranks, Filch lurched up the staircase, Mrs. Norris at his heels, to investigate the noise.

As soon as he arrived at the landing, however, he was abruptly thrown backward, colliding sharply with the wall headfirst. Wood splinters, pieces of stone, and an unpleasant yellow-green acid fell around him, and dust was thrust up into the air.

A shriek of insane laughter echoed down the hall. Filch shook his throbbing head, trying desperately to stabilize his vision, and when he looked through the dusty air, he was horrified to discover the source of the wicked glee.

Three menacing, black-cloaked figures had come out into the hallway, wands drawn. A tall, statuesque woman with long, curly dark hair and a mad gleam in her eye stood proudly at the front of the group.

"Find him!" she told the others. "Blast open this school until he comes running!"

She laughed again as she raised her wand, waving it violently at one of the walls and ripping it down. The stone went flying, shattering apart as if it were made of glass.

Despite the pain he was in, Filch immediately thought of his beloved pet. Lunging forward, he grabbed the pitifully mewling Mrs. Norris off the floor, and then scrambled back down the stairs. He needed to find cover – to get help –

Within the second minute, there was movement in the teachers' chambers. All of them quickly leapt out of bed and harried to discover the source of the commotion. Professor Burbage found out by running into Argus Filch in the fourth floor corridor. Professor Sprout found out when the Fat Friar floated down through the ceiling of her office and told her of the attack. Two of the teachers, Professors Sinistra and Flitwick, found out by colliding with Bellatrix head-on.

In seconds the whole thing devolved into a full-on wizard's duel in the fifth floor corridor. Flitwick

fought valiantly, but the former-Dueling Champion found himself struggling against Bellatrix even with Sinistra's help, and soon they were forced back down the hallway, struggling and failing to hold their ground. Not long later Professor McGonagall arrived, just as another Death Eater – Thorfinn Rowle – joined Bellatrix's side.

Professors Vector and Ramsay ran into each other on their way down the fifth floor corridor. Both of them had their wands drawn and their faces were very pale.

“Gordon,” whispered Vector as they dashed down the hallway together, “you...you don't think –”

Ramsay knew what Vector was thinking, but he just couldn't fathom it. Death Eaters at Hogwarts – at *Hogwarts*, the safest place on earth, that resilient fortress with constant Auror protection and impenetrable shields conjured by Dumbledore himself – ?

BANG!

All of a sudden the two professors were thrown backward off their feet when the wall to their left exploded in a blast of yellow-green acid.

Within the third minute there was some small traces of movement in the student dorms.

Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, following the instructions Harry had left them, each took a gulp of the Felix Felicis before leaving the rest on Ginny's bedside table and rushing downstairs, wands drawn.

Hector Summerby instructed the Hufflepuff prefects who'd woken up to keep everyone inside their commonroom while he found Professor Sprout. In the hallway he collided with her, who instructed him to make sure the rest of the teachers were informed of the attack before returning to his dormitory.

Eddie Carmichael reassured the Ravenclaw prefects that he'd go outside and find out what was going on. Unfortunately not long after he reached the base of the stairs, the newly arrived Rabastian Lestrange confronted Carmichael and the two immediately started to duel, with Carmichael trying desperately to lead Lestrange away from his commonroom.

In the Slytherin dungeons, everyone was restless. Without being ordered, all of them had come down to the commonroom, their dressing robes on and their wands out, as they all alertly watched the wall that hid the entrance, waiting for Professor Snape or another teacher to arrive with information and reassurance. But no one came.

While Bellatrix Lestrange and her companions started ripping apart the school, a white cat slipped away down the hall, unseen by everyone. The Felix Felicis was going to wear off soon, but he had a feeling he knew what to do to get Dumbledore to come to him...

Within the fifth minute there were injuries.

The Ravenclaws got a horrible fright when Professor Ramsay made his way into their commonroom, supporting a badly injured Professor Vector.

“Is there anyone here who knows Healing?!” he demanded, his voice clearly strained with desperation and urgency.

Vector’s arm had been blasted clean off. She was covered in blood, and sickly yellow-green acid caked the stump that had once been her right shoulder.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, Astoria dashed forward out of the fold, rushing over to help support Vector as she crumpled to the floor.

“Don’t touch the acid,” Ramsay told Astoria sharply.

The two eased the Arithmancy professor down onto one of the couches. Vector tried desperately to keep her composure, but her face was shining with sweat and she could not hold back the silent tears of pain that ran down her cheeks like tiny rivers.

“We need towels and cold water!” Ramsay barked over his shoulder.

Marietta Edgcombe ran to fetch them. Ramsay reached into his robes and took out a rectangular blue bottle and he turned to Astoria urgently.

“Astoria, this is essence of dittany,” he said. “Do you know it?”

“Yes, sir,” said Astoria. Her voice was very soft and shaky, but confident.

“Good – the acid from the Death’s Head Shell is trying to eat through the skin, see? We need to stop that, fast. Apply the dittany to the burns every 30 seconds – *promptly*, do you understand? Keep applying it even after the acid dissolves – don’t stop until you’re sure the pain’s stopped. Okay?”

“Okay,” Astoria whispered. Her throat was very dry.

Marietta arrived with the towels and a pail of cold water. Ramsay immediately grabbed a small towel, soaking it in the water and then squeezing it dry, before he applied it to Vector’s forehead.

“Keep an eye on her temperature,” he said. “If her forehead’s warm to the touch, use cold water compresses to keep her cool. Are you going to be okay?”

Astoria nodded.

“That’s a good girl,” murmured Ramsay, squeezing her shoulder supportively. He looked down at Vector, who was blinking up through her sweat and tears at him. “Hang in there, Septima – I’ll find Poppy and bring her upstairs – ”

Ramsay got to his feet and headed for the door.

“Professor!” said Cho. “Please – what’s going on?”

Ramsay turned to her solemnly.

“...There are Death Eaters in the castle,” he said very quietly.

The students all reacted in shock. Arjuna, who had been sitting in an armchair since she was too feverish and dizzy to stand, went very white.

“I need you all to fortify the commonroom,” Ramsay told them urgently. “I know the Death Eaters are not generally known for their intellect, but Gibbon’s out there and he was once a Ravenclaw, so he’ll know where your commonroom is. A riddle might not be enough protection.”

With this, he swept out of the room.

Meanwhile Flitwick found Professor Snape downstairs and told him of the battle. The two headed back up the staircase, with only one of the two aware of what the Death Eaters’ arrival really meant.

Within the sixth minute the D.A. coins Hermione had made had started to burn.

Neville had had his on his bedside table and noticed the date change when he was sitting on his bed. He ran into Ginny on the stairs – she’d already found the bottle of Felix Felicis and the short note Hermione had left her a moment before.

Luna Lovegood, who always kept the coin in her pocket, bolted past the growing barricades inside the Ravenclaw commonroom into the hallway without hesitation, her Golden-Snidget-printed dressing gown flapping behind her like a cape. Terry Boot then urged the remaining Ravenclaw D.A. members – Padma Patil, Michael Corner, Anthony Goldstein, and Cho Chang – after her. Cho gave Marietta a huge hug before leaving her and the other prefects in charge of the commonroom.

Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones had just finished helping the seventh year prefects assemble the underclassmen together in the common area (Owen Cauldwell had been particularly difficult to wake), when Ernie Macmillan ran over to them, his dark eyes very wide and urgent.

“Hannah! Susan!”

He held up his D.A. coin. Shining red-hot along the edges was the date:

JUNE 30, 1997 11:21 PM

Susan and Hannah's eyes grew wide as well.

"...There's a meeting right now," Susan whispered.

The three looked at each other in horrified realization. The D.A. had taught them how to fight the Dark Arts – if there was a meeting tonight, after an entire year of silence, on a night when everyone was woken up by a series of explosions...that had to mean that Harry, Ron, Hermione, and the rest of the D.A. were fighting upstairs at that very moment.

"We have to get up there!" Hannah said anxiously.

"But what about the underclassmen?" whispered Ernie, glancing around at the mob of students gathered in the commonroom. "We're needed here, to look after them – Summerby said –"

It was clear as he said it, though, that his loyalties were split between his house and Dumbledore's Army.

"Ernie, we *can't* let them fight on their own," Hannah murmured urgently. "The other prefects can protect the commonroom – no one'll be able to get in, with how hidden our entrance is – but Ernie, if our friends are out there, we *have* to help them!"

Ernie nodded decisively. "You're right – come now, let's go, before anyone has the chance to stop us –"

The three pushed through the crowd, dashing over to the commonroom's exit as fast as they could.

Within seven minutes the Order of the Phoenix had arrived. Soon Ron and Susan were fighting alongside Kingsley Shacklebolt, while Terry Boot and Ginny fought side by side with Fleur

Delacour. Snape recruited Luna and Hermione to watch over an unconscious Flitwick while he returned to the battle.

Hannah tried to keep Ernie and Susan in sight as they joined the fray, but within seconds they were separated by the scuffle of flares and spells. She dived behind a wall, conjuring the best Shield Charms she could to deflect the hexes being blasted at her from the other side. She was so focused on blocking spells she didn't have enough time to react when a Death's Head Shell blew apart the ceiling over her head. Hannah involuntarily hunched down, ducking and covering.

“PROTEGO!”

Hannah raised her head. Neville Longbottom had lunged forward, raising his wand high and conjuring a Shield charm over both of them. The yellow-green-acid-laced stone bounced off as if it were made of rubber, colliding with the ground with a *SMASH*.

Hannah looked up at Neville with a shaky smile.

“Thanks!” she breathed weakly.

His round face faintly flushed, Neville reached out a hand to help Hannah to her feet. A moment later, however, they immediately had to raise their wands again and defend themselves against another onslaught of spells. Rowle shot bright green Killing Curses in every direction, blasting open walls and slamming chandeliers to the floor. Just as he was about to reach Neville and Hannah, however, a spell from behind collided with his shoulder, making his wand fly out of his hand.

Remus Lupin, looking even gaunter than usual, barreled down the hallway, coming to a stop between Neville and Hannah.

“Are you two all right?” he asked them, his soft voice urgent.

“Yes, Professor,” Neville and Hannah said together, both thrilled by the sight of him.

Hannah was the first to notice Rabastian LeStrange coming to Rowle's aid, raising his wand.

“Protego!” she cried.

Her Shield blocked his black spell just in time, rebounding it back against the wall and leaving a sizzling burn.

Within eight minutes the Slytherins had had enough.

“No one’s coming,” said Richard Thorne sharply.

“The professors must be busy dealing with everything upstairs,” said the Head Girl, a seventh year boy with blond hair named Julien Montmercy, trying to mask his concern.

“If that’s the case,” said Tracey Davis matter-of-factly, “we needn’t do anything.”

Another loud burst of sound upstairs made everybody flinch.

“We at least need to know what’s going on!” said Roy Harper, the Slytherin Seeker. “We can’t just be expected to sit here quietly until the professors *remember* to keep us in the loop!”

“You first, then, Harper,” said Zabini scornfully.

“Yeah, after this last Quidditch season, you’re bound to be no great loss – “ sneered a Slytherin third year called Rackham.

The other Slytherins devolved into angry muttering.

“Silence, all of you.”

Everyone abruptly quieted as Daphne Greengrass took a step forward, glaring around at everyone with the most condescending of stares.

“Roy is right about one thing,” she said softly. “We do need information. So unless we all want to draw lots on who will go upstairs, someone better come up with some other way we can get it.”

Everyone stewed in silence for a few seconds. Then Millicent Bulstrode straightened up slightly, opened her mouth, and spoke very loudly and clearly.

“Winky.”

CRACK.

The other Slytherins flinched slightly when the house elf appeared in the middle of the room. Winky blinked up at Millicent, her long lashes fluttering over her large dark eyes.

“You called, Miss Millicent?”

“Yes,” said Millicent lowly. “Winky, I need you to go upstairs and find out what’s going on. Don’t let anyone see you, and come straight back here as soon as you know.”

Winky gave a slightly nervous, but firm little nod. “Yes, miss!”

CRACK.

As the ten-minute mark approached, the Ravenclaws solidified their barricade. Marietta rushed around the common room, dictating instructions to the rest of the students. She knew she had to keep her classmates moving – if there was one thing a Ravenclaw hated more than anything, it was feeling ineffectual or useless, so the only way to keep sanity in the room was to keep everyone busy with activity.

Marietta looked out the window at the grounds. It was pitch-black – the only light came from the lightning storm that illuminated everything sharply with flares of white.

The Aurors had to be out there – there was no disturbance outside, so the Death Eaters must have somehow gotten in without them knowing – and if the explosions were all inside, they might not even know what was happening –

“We need to alert the Aurors,” she told the others. “Everyone gather together anything combustible – Filibuster Fireworks, Dungbombs, matches – anything that’ll burn! We’ll make a signal from our window!”

The students all rushed up to their dorms to gather materials. Marietta moved over to Astoria and Arjuna, who were now both sitting on the floor beside the wounded Professor Vector.

“How is she?” Marietta asked Astoria.

Vector gave a weak whimper in her sleep. Astoria’s face was very pale as she dabbed some more dittany to the professor’s shoulder with a towel.

“Not good,” the fourth-year murmured. “The dittany’s working, but it’s slow – I’m trying to keep her top half elevated to help with blood flow, but her fever’s getting worse...”

Astoria soaked another towel in the cold water, wiping Vector’s forehead clean of sweat. Arjuna, despite being quite feverish herself, still moved to help Astoria, materializing more cold water out of her wand to fill the pail.

“Marietta,” Arjuna whispered, her hoarse voice marred with unease. “When you...send the message to the Aurors – can you...please tell them to go to the Astronomy Tower?”

Marietta and Astoria both blinked.

“I know it sounds crazy,” Arjuna said shakily, “but – *please*, tell them? I have a really bad feeling...about the Tower, tonight...”

Astoria’s blue eyes narrowed in concern upon Arjuna. Marietta looked from Arjuna to Astoria, before nodding solemnly.

“Okay.”

Marietta hurried back upstairs to check in with the other students.

“Arjuna?” murmured Astoria.

Arjuna leaned back against the side of the couch and closed her eyes, but she appeared no less anxious.

The dream that had kept her up night after night and had left her feeling so ill depicted a tower struck by lightning. Towers, in fortune telling, generally foretold destruction.

A minute after she’d left, Winky returned to the Slytherin commonroom, looking very shaken. She collapsed to the ground, clutching her forearms in terror.

“Winky!” said Millicent, bending down beside her to make sure she wasn’t hurt.

Winky looked up at Millicent, her dark eyes very wide, before the elf reached out and clutched the front of Millicent’s black dressing gown.

“Miss Millicent!” she cried desperately. “Miss Millicent, there is Dark wizards in the school! There is *Death Eaters inside Hogwarts!*”

The Slytherin commonroom filled with an array of gasps.

“There is so much fighting, Miss Millicent!” whimpered Winky. “Professors and students, all fighting and dueling – Winky almost got flattened when the ceiling caved in – the Dark wizards has Death’s Head Shells – ”

Bridget rushed over, bending down next to Millicent and Winky.

“You said there were *students* out there?” she said urgently. “*Who*, Winky?”

Winky’s lip trembled. “A...R-Ravenclaw boy Winky didn’t know – the n-new H-Head Boy – ”

“Summerby,” supplied Bridget. Montmercy went visibly paler at the mention of his counterpart.

Winky nodded fearfully. “A-and – there was – M-M-Miss Abbott – a-and M-Master Weasley – ”

Bridget’s face blanched. In a violent move, she shot to her feet and ran across the room; Montmercy quickly stepped in front of the wall that covered the entrance to the commonroom to try to cut her off.

“Jaheem, wait!” he barked.

But Bridget didn’t even give him the dignity of an argument – instead she just whipped out her wand and pointed it right at him without breaking out of her run.

“*Averte Sactum!*”

With a blast of white light, Montmercy was blasted clean off his feet and Bridget ran past him through the opening wall, her oversized purple dressing gown flapping behind her. Montmercy quickly stumbled back to his feet just as the wall slid shut.

“Just let her go!” sneered Pansy. “She’s not worth protecting!”

Montmercy looked over his shoulder at Pansy, and everyone else in the common room gave a great flinch when they saw just how dangerous of a glint rippled through his eye. Adjusting his peacock-printed dressing gown, he turned to the others, his ice-blue glare as fearsome as some mad wolf as he prowled back into the center of the room.

“We’ve got to fortify this commonroom,” he told them sharply. “This wall alone is not going to keep out the Death Eaters – no one else is leaving this room, not until we can get help – ”

“What do we need help for?” sneered Zabini. “The Death Eaters aren’t going to hurt *us* – ”

“They’re attacking the school, and we’re *in* it,” snapped Montmercy. “And in case you’ve *forgotten*, Zabini, most of the Death Eaters were once Slytherins, so they *know where our common room is*. A password isn’t going to keep them out, if they want in.”

“But,” Thorne said quietly, “you’re a Pureblood – ”

Montmercy turned to the first year. His gaze was much less cruel, but no less reproachful.

“You’re right,” he said quietly. “I am Pureblood, or at least, close enough to it. But as far as this school and my parents are concerned, I’m your Head *Girl*...aren’t I?”

The others all hushed. Montmercy turned around, staring them all down in turn.

“Let’s be frank here – the Death Eaters are not just going to put targets on the backs of Muggle-borns or half-bloods or half-breeds or Squibs. If they only cared about blood, would they *really* have recruited Fenrir Greyback? Alphonse Gibbon? *My father*, who is so close to being a Squib, it was a shock that he made it into Hogwarts? No – they don’t care about blood – they care about *loyalty*, and who will get them their so-called ‘*perfect*’ world full of Pureblood babies. Do you *really* think they’d be okay with any Purebloods who *didn’t* want to have children – any who deviated from the gender they were assigned at birth, or who had sexual preferences that would contradict their vision of a husband and wife and seven kids? Do you really think they’d be okay with anyone who would choose their safety, or their family’s safety, over their precious *cause*? Do you really think they’d be okay with anyone who might want to do things *other* than marry someone just for their blood? Do you really think they’d be okay with anyone talking back to them or contradicting *any little thing that came out of their mouths*?”

Many of the other Slytherins exchanged anxious looks. Although there were a few like Zabini, Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy who were ignorant enough to be unperturbed, others like Tracey suddenly looked a little less confident. Millicent and Daphne glanced at each other out the corner of their eye.

“Don’t be stupid enough,” said Montmercy solemnly, “to think that magical blood could shield you from a Death’s Head Shell or a Killing Curse, let alone keep you out of the War. The Death Eaters are bullies – when they succeed in taking out their victims, they’ll immediately go looking around for new ones, and those new ones could be you. After all...even if you are somehow the most perfect specimen...doesn’t that then make you the perfect foot soldier for the Death Eaters to put on the front lines?”

Montmercy raised his wand, levitating a couch to sit in front of the wall that covered the commonroom entrance.

“Winky,” he told the house elf, “go to Hogsmeade and get help. The rest of you, let's block off this wall and try to get our hands on some Floo Powder, in case we need to evacuate.”

Thirteen minutes after the attack began, the Ravenclaws' fireworks started blasting off from the tower, creating exclamation points and arrows pointing toward the Astronomy Tower. The Aurors all rushed to the castle, Nymphadora Tonks in the lead.

Meanwhile, inside, Ron and Susan ran deeper into the school, trying to secure the Death Eaters' point of entry. With a little help from the Felix Felicis he'd taken, Ron led Susan to the fifth floor corridor and the Room of Requirement. Once they'd figured out the right question to ask, they found themselves in the Room Where Everything is Hidden, and found a Vanishing Cabinet not unlike the one Harry had mentioned seeing in Knockturn Alley. Not long after they arrived, Death Eater Etienne Montmercy stepped out of it, and Ron and Susan were immediately thrown into a three-way duel with the much older man. When Susan finally got the upper hand and subdued the man by hexing his lips together and then Stunning him, the two rushed over to the Cabinet.

“Bombardment Spell on three?” said Ron.

Susan nodded firmly. “One – two – *three!*”

“*BOMBARDA!*” they cried together.

The Cabinet imploded with a loud *CRASH*, the door flying off its hinges and landing somewhere in a junk pile several yards away.

“*That'll* keep them from getting reinforcements!” Ron said triumphantly.

Fifteen minutes after the attack began, the Dark Mark appeared over the Astronomy Tower. By that point the Aurors had arrived inside the castle and had joined the Order members, teachers, and students in fighting the small batch of Death Eaters. Hermione wordlessly shielded the unconscious Flitwick from a swath of magical fire, and Tonks came to Lupin's rescue when Yaxley tried to hit him with a Killing Curse.

Eddie Carmichael had just about made it down to the ground level when he collided with Bill Weasley on the staircase, just in time for Bill to Shield him from another Death's Head Shell explosion.

"Thanks for that!" said Carmichael genially.

Bill grinned. "No problem – "

At that very moment, someone shot forward so abruptly he was like a blur, landing on Bill and flattening him to the ground, tearing at his clothes with his teeth like a mad animal.

It was Fenrir Greyback.

Barely having any time to think, Carmichael angrily and wordlessly Summoned the beastly man toward him just enough that he could throw Greyback into the opposite wall.

Carmichael ran over to Bill. The eldest Weasley's face and torso was covered with deep gashes and blood and he seemed to be momentarily stunned.

"Hey – " hissed Carmichael, as he hurried to bring an arm around Bill to pick him up, "hey – stay with me now – don't konk out – "

A horrible snarl came up from behind him – Carmichael whirled around, to see Fenrir Greyback lunging straight for them –

BAM!

Out of nowhere, Ramsay had lunged forward and punched the werewolf right in the jaw, knocking

him backward. The suddenness and physicality of the attack threw Greyback off and gave Carmichael just enough time to stabilize his grip on his wand and Stun him.

“Professor!” gasped Carmichael in relief.

Ramsay ran over to help Carmichael support Bill.

“Come on,” he said urgently, “let's get him somewhere safe – ”

Eighteen minutes had passed, and the battle still raged on. Bridget caught up with Ginny and the two took on Gibbon until he was taken out by a stray Killing Curse cast by Rowle. Hannah and Neville fought against Yaxley, beating him back up the hallway and away from the Hospital Wing where Ramsay had delivered some of the injured. Bellatrix had slashed Ernie across the face with a knife-like spell, but the Hufflepuff prefect blinked the blood and pain out of his eyes and tried to chase after her as she plowed down the hallway, smashing the Gryffindor point hourglass as she went.

In the Hufflepuff commonroom, the underage students sat and waited, all huddled together on the floor and in cozy chairs, for the storm to clear. The prefects (excluding Ernie and Hannah) stood in front of the tunnel that was the entrance to the commonroom, wands drawn in a protective stance.

Owen had brought together his friends in a tight-knit clump on the floor by the fireplace. Malcolm Preece and Tamsin Applebee sat to Owen's left, while Gregory Munslow sat on his stomach on the floor just in front of him. Owen kept an arm around Eleanor, who was shaking visibly, in an attempt to comfort her. It was as they sat that Owen spotted Rose pacing the room anxiously in the back.

"Rose," Owen called over.

Rose looked up; although she didn't look afraid exactly, she did look a bit on edge. Owen silently gestured for her to come sit next to him, his dark face touched by a small smile.

Despite her nerves that made her reluctant to sit down, Rose uneasily walked over and settled herself slowly onto the spot Owen had indicated. As soon as she sat down, Owen immediately brought his other arm around her and squeezed her close to his side too.

The group sat in silence for a minute, but Rose seemed to be having trouble relaxing; she kept adjusting her legs and arms uncomfortably.

"You okay?" murmured Owen.

Rose huddled in on herself unhappily, her eyes drawn to the floor. "It's too quiet - things aren't supposed to be this quiet...it just feels like...like there's no movement, no life - like...you're *useless*..."

Owen's eyes softened. He knew how she felt - if the prefects hadn't been guarding the portrait hole to make sure the underclassman didn't run out into the fray, he likely would've gone out there too. He hated the thought of Hannah, Ron, and the others being out there alone...

Securing his arm around her, Owen fell into silence. Then, after a moment of thinking, he opened his mouth and started to hum a tune badly under his breath.

"Can you dance like a hippogriff? Ma ma ma, ma ma ma, ma ma ma..."

"Flying off from a cliff? Ma ma ma, ma ma ma, ma ma ma..."

His friends looked up at him, perplexed. Rose in particular looked very confused.

Owen gave her a small, unabashed smile.

"You said it was too quiet," he said, his down-to-earth voice sounding almost like it was vocally shrugging. "I can't help with the activity...but at least I can fix the sound problem."

Rose found her mouth spreading wide into a grin despite herself.

"You're so weird," she said amusedly.

Owen's smile broadened slightly. "Just following in your shoes, I guess."

From that point on, when the room got too quiet, Rose and Owen would take turns badly humming something to the rest of the group. And as strange as it sounded, all of the Hufflepuffs in the commonroom found some solace in the silly tunes that would flutter through the air.

Meanwhile upstairs, the eleven Death Eaters swarmed around the base of the Astronomy Tower like a hive of bees. They knew up there, somewhere, was the sniveling boy who the Dark Lord had selected to complete their mission.

By the time the attack was twenty minutes old, a wall of Death Eaters had blocked off the Astronomy Tower. Bellatrix was making her way up the stairs with about four others, while the remaining six stayed behind and held the boundary. Out of nowhere Severus Snape ran through the melee and right through the barrier as if it were only made of mist.

At the top of the Astronomy Tower two figures – one small and pointing his wand with a trembling hand and the other tall, ghostly, and faintly hunched over – exchanged words that only one other unseen soul ever heard.

Twenty-two minutes after the attack first began, the task was done.

At the sight of an unknown body falling from the Astronomy Tower, the ten citizens of Hogsmeade who'd come to help ran up the grounds to create a barrier around the school, Hagrid alongside them.

The Death Eaters blasted through the Order members, Aurors, students, and teachers in an attempt to leave the school, as they could no longer go back out the way they came in. Thanks to the many reinforcements, however, the Death Eaters' ranks were soon divided, with every member out for himself. Fenrir Greyback and Etienne Montmercy had already been Stunned; Gibbon was dead; and soon Alecto and Amycus Carrow and Rabastian Lestrage fell behind.

Twenty-five minutes after the attack first began, Severus Snape, Draco Malfoy, and the remaining six Death Eaters confronted the Hogsmeade reinforcements on the Hogwarts grounds. Madame

Rosmerta courageously took on Rodolphus Lestrangle, while Madame Puddifoot successfully wrangled Yaxley. The weedy black-bearded owner of Gladrag's Wizardwear even managed to hold off Rowle with nothing but Tickling Charms. Snape wordlessly disarmed two Zonko's employees at the same time before he heard Harry's voice ringing out in the distance.

“COWARD!”

His black eyes narrowing upon the dark-haired boy running toward him, the former Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher thrust his hand into Draco's back, shoving him forward violently.

“GO!” he roared, as he wordlessly deflected Harry's *Levicorpus* spell.

Antonin Dolohov snatched Draco up harshly by the collar, yanking him along after him as he Disapparated.

The entire nightmare had only lasted twenty-six minutes. By the time it was over, thirty people were wounded, nine out of the twelve Death Eaters who'd originally broken into the castle were captured and one had been killed, and Hagrid's hut had almost been burned to the ground.

Not long after the dust had settled, the worst news of all began to travel around the school on the transparent lips of the school ghosts, burying itself harshly into the unsuspecting backs of every student and teacher as if it were a dagger.

Albus Dumbledore was dead.

Saying Goodbye

The news broke when Ginny led Harry to the Hospital Wing to meet up with the Order of the Phoenix. There were quite a few wounded students and teachers inside. Most of the Order was crowded around Bill Weasley's bed by the center window. Professor Vector was resting several beds down with Ramsay and Burbage sitting on either side of her. Harry told McGonagall and the others about what had happened up at the top of the Astronomy Tower – Dumbledore and him arriving to investigate the Dark Mark, Draco's confession, and Snape's betrayal – and everyone reacted with horror and grief. Everyone except Ramsay.

When Ramsay first heard the words "*Dumbledore is dead*," he turned away, soaking a cloth with some water and dabbing it against Vector's temple to keep himself occupied. He seemed remarkably composed, but no matter what Burbage said to him, Ramsay didn't reply. Finally, once the story had come out and the Order members had started to cry and assign themselves blame, Ramsay seemed to have heard enough. Rising to his feet, he rather purposefully walked out of the Hospital Wing, right past Harry and the Order members without looking at them, and closed the door behind him with a sharp *snap*.

Later Harry found Ramsay outside the Hospital Wing, sitting on the edge of a windowsill and looking out onto the grounds. The remnants of the lightning storm outside flared through the windows, sharply illuminating his white robes and casting dark shadows over his square face.

"...Professor Ramsay?"

Ramsay looked up at Harry. His face was unusually calm.

"...Hello, Harry."

Harry stepped forward to stand beside the windowsill so they could talk face-to-face.

"...You left kind of abruptly," he said uncomfortably.

Ramsay gave a small grimace. "Forgive me, Harry, I...just really didn't want to listen."

Harry lowered himself onto the sill beside Ramsay. "...I know how that feels. I mean, when Sirius died, I hated it when people would bring him up – say that he was dead – "

“No...no, I’m afraid it’s not like that,” said Ramsay, shaking his head. “It’s not the news that upset me – I just...didn’t want to listen to everyone grieving about it.”

Harry’s eyebrows furrowed.

“I’m sorry, Harry...but I knew Dumbledore was going to die, sooner or later. He was a very old man who was constantly putting himself in danger by fighting You-Know-Who – and, well, as much as we’ve been able to work together pleasantly enough this last year, it doesn’t change the fact that Dumbledore and I have a lot of old hatchets in our pasts. His death can’t wipe those away.”

Harry was disgusted by what he was hearing. After being surrounded by so many people who had loved and respected Dumbledore and were so pained by his death, listening to someone speaking about it so callously, so *flippantly* was insulting.

“He was *murdered*!” Harry said angrily. “He didn’t just die in his sleep, or get killed by Voldemort –” he ignored Ramsay’s flinch, “– he died at the hands of a man he’d trusted!”

“I said over and over that he should never have forgiven Snape,” Ramsay said dully. “You yourself said you didn’t understand it.”

“That isn’t the point!” yelled Harry. His eyes were stinging with tears. “*Obviously* Dumbledore was wrong! But you can’t just rant about how he should’ve known better – Dumbledore is *dead* because of Snape! Him trusting Snape wasn’t a weakness – him believing there was good in Snape may have been a mistake, but it’s not something he should’ve lost his life for!”

Ramsay considered Harry for a moment, his sharp blue eyes narrowing in thought. Then he tried to speak more gently, though his face remained so infuriatingly neutral.

“...Harry, I know Dumbledore meant a lot to you. I daresay he was there for you when no one else was...probably encouraged you, counseled you, and behaved like a friend. But you have to understand that Dumbledore was more than that. He was a manipulative, clever man, and you’re not the only one he persuaded to join his fight against You-Know-Who...you’re not the only one who was tempted by the idea of fraternity and loyalty – ”

“SHUT UP!”

Harry got to his feet, his green eyes blazing.

“I don’t *understand* you! You *hate* Voldemort – ” Ramsay flinched, “ – the Death Eaters, those rats over at the *Stormer* – you *know* they must be stopped, you *know* that they must be fought, yet all you’ve done, from the time you got here, is refuse to help!”

Ramsay’s eyes narrowed. “There are ways to help besides joining the Order, Harry.”

“Well, it’s the *Order* that needs help!” Harry shot back. “They’ve needed help this entire year, and yet all *you* can do is rant about how dirty Dumbledore is and how he brought his death on himself – ”

“I did not say that,” Ramsay said, trying to deescalate the argument, but it didn’t work.

“*DUMBLEDORE IS NOT THE ORDER!*” Harry roared. “The Order isn’t just *his*; it’s McGonagall’s, and Lupin’s, and Tonks’s, and Kingsley’s, and the Weasleys’, and everybody else’s! The Order is everyone who has decided to fight Voldemort – ” again, Ramsay flinched, and it only served to make Harry angrier, “rather than flinch and hide like a *COWARD!*”

Ramsay remained astonishingly cool in the face of Harry’s anger, though his temper was being tried.

“Harry, not everyone is cut out to be a soldier,” he said, forcibly keeping his volume from rising, “and contrary to what Dumbledore would have you believe, there are ways to thwart the Death Eaters *besides* brute force – ”

“So says the man who yelled at Slughorn and Bagnold for refusing to stand up to Cuffe’s article?” challenged Harry coldly. “Guess that was just you getting up on your high horse – it’s not like you actually *care* if anyone gets hurt – ”

Finally Harry had gone too far. In an instant Ramsay had stood up and pulled out his wand, but Harry was quicker. On instinct alone, he pointed his wand at Ramsay and cried, “*Expelliarmus!*”

With a burst of red light Ramsay was thrown across the hall, landing back first into the wall. His

silver-tipped wand flew out of his hand and ended up colliding with a suit of armor on the other end.

Time suddenly stopped, all sounds stilling at once. Harry stared, dumbfounded.

Ramsay had *clearly* been trying to fight, to actually cause some damage, and yet...a simple Disarming spell had catapulted him to the ground. Harry tried imagining McGonagall or Flitwick in the same position, and the image looked absurd. Even *Snape* had only been taken down by three Disarming spells being cast in unison, and that was when he was taken off-guard. This wasn't Ramsay going easy on him or being taken by surprise – this was *incompetence*. Incompetence the likes of which Harry hadn't seen since Snape disarmed Lockhart back in second year...

Ramsay slowly pulled himself to his feet, his blue eyes a little sharper and his mouth curled up in an oddly dark smile.

“Expecting more, were you?” he said coolly, raising his hands up to sarcastically “present” himself. “Expecting me to breathe fire and shoot Stunning spells out my arse? Sorry to disappoint – but my area of expertise is Potions. Cooking. Organizing and financing and networking...and coming up with extravagant swears, on occasion. I never claimed to be a world-class Dueling Champion like Filius or a magical prodigy like Minerva. Hell...I never got *close* to earning an OWL in Defense Against the Dark Arts when I was at school. Even in the battle the most assistance I could offer was getting the injured off the battlefield, giving them some basic medical help – I'd lost my wand early on, so I couldn't have dueled even if I'd *wanted* to – I had to punch that creep Greyback in the *face*, for crying out loud – ”

Harry was left speechless. It wasn't as though he'd seen Ramsay as perfect – he clearly wasn't. He had a bad temper, he could be *ridiculously* stubborn, and from day one he'd refused to get involved in the War at any capacity and yet also actively condemned any students who had tried to go out and fight in his place. And yet, even with all that, this shook Harry. He'd always imagined Ramsay to stand toe-to-toe with the other teachers, perhaps because of his confidence or even just his aggressive attitude with people he didn't like...but Ramsay was in truth no better than Gilderoy Lockhart when it came to defending himself with magic...

“*Not everyone is a soldier, Harry,*” Ramsay repeated solemnly, as he turned to leave. “Dumbledore never learned that, but I'm sure you can. I took this job at Hogwarts to teach Potions and to help the students – not fight Dumbledore's battles. You came to Hogwarts to learn, to make friends, to master your magic – not blindly follow whatever bogus prophecy happens to have your name on it.”

The mention of the prophecy startled Harry back to life.

“You’re right.”

Ramsay stilled in mid-step.

“I *don’t* have to blindly follow it,” Harry said firmly, “and I won’t...because the prophecy was self-fulfilling. It said that Voldemort – ” Ramsay flinched, “ – won’t rest while I’m alive and that I won’t rest until he’s defeated. That’s true. I can’t act as though Voldemort – ” another flinch, “ – wouldn’t have targeted my mum and dad and me, if he hadn’t known the prophecy existed...but I know even if I never learned about it, I would never, *ever* let Voldemort hurt people if I could stop him.”

Ramsay stood in silence, unable to look at Harry.

“James and Lily died to save your life,” he said, his voice unusually soft. “Are you really going to just throw that away?”

Harry’s green eyes flashed.

“You knew my parents, Professor,” he said coldly. “Do you really think they’d want me to hide myself away and leave my friends to fight Voldemort on their own?”

Ramsay seemed to have trouble conjuring up a response. Harry, however, was too aggravated to give him time to gather his thoughts – instead he just turned and walked away up the closest staircase.

All of Hogwarts mourned the loss of the school’s Headmaster. The gloom that settled down over the grounds was insurmountable. It felt as though the stars themselves had been shaken and that the ground itself was suddenly insubstantial. If Albus Dumbledore could die – if *Albus Dumbledore* could be killed by one of his own professors, thanks to the efforts of one of his own students...how bright could the world possibly be? How much hope could possibly still exist in the world?

It was decided that Dumbledore’s funeral would be held at Hogwarts the following week and the students would be allowed to attend before returning home on the Hogwarts Express. Many other

guests arrived over the course of the day, including the headmistress of Beauxbatons, Madame Maxime; the bass singer for the Weird Sisters, Donaghan Tremlett; and the Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour. Harry also noticed sourly that both Dolores Umbridge and Rita Skeeter were in attendance, no doubt out of formality rather than any actual grief, and he purposefully avoided them. He was in no mood to deal with them – not on *that* day, not after what had happened...

Harry sat next to Ginny, with Hermione, Ron, Luna, and Bridget beside them. After Malfoy had been exposed as the leak into Hogwarts, the student body came to the conclusion that Bridget probably hadn't poisoned Ron after all and had been significantly nicer to her again. As much as Harry felt frustrated that no one had believed him sooner, he just didn't have the strength or desire to put that frustration into words. The emotions that raged through him left him feeling empty and exhausted, as though a horrible storm had ripped apart his entire being.

One person missing from the funeral, however, was Ramsay. As the ceremony began and he scanned the guests in black robes sitting around him, Harry couldn't see the Potions professor anywhere, and it left a burning resentment rumbling in the pit of his stomach.

The funeral itself was predictably somber and formal. Most everyone was crying throughout the merpeople's musical performance and the rather stilted eulogy. Harry found himself tuning out during much of it – everything seemed so dreary, so cold...and Dumbledore had *never* been cold. He was warm and witty and wise – and as much as Harry felt so much grief about his death, it almost felt odd to pay respects to such a man with a grandiose, plodding lament.

As the eulogy came to a close, a young man stepped forward onto the stage, a pale yellow and black guitar on a strap around his neck and shoulder. He was a sharp contrast to the tiny, tufty-haired wizard who'd performed the eulogy – he was young and perfectly dashing, with black-dyed hair and black eyeliner around his bright blue eyes, and he was dressed in elegant black and violet dress robes that were quite a bit more stylish than the former's drab, conservative threads. He faced the guests gathered before him, his handsome face touched with discomfort as he addressed them.

"I wrote a song for this, but...out of respect for the man himself, I feel that song I wrote isn't the right one to perform...so I'll give you the one I wrote first."

He swallowed, his eyes drifting to Dumbledore's body in the casket set up behind him.

"...Hope you like it, Professor," he said very quietly.

The young man solemnly started to play a soft chord on his guitar. The fragile notes echoed

modestly across the grounds in delicate twangs.

*“Let me sing a tale of a man old and wise –
Let me sing a tale of that last big surprise,
Of the day where he came upon his life’s end
And instead of a foe he found a good friend.”*

The singer’s face spread into a smile as the song’s tone and tempo shifted. It was no longer solemn – it was gentle and almost light, like a leisurely recollection.

*“His name was Death –
Scary at first glance,
But boy, that guy can dance
Like no one’s watching...*

*He took his hand
And got swept away...
Now the two shall play,
Forever botching*

*Decking and checking,
Eternally wrecking our woe –
Here comes the wisdom
From their deathly kingdom:
Dying’s nothing but a show!”*

The crowd sat stock-still, dumbfounded. The entire ceremony had been so despondent, so serious – so *respectful* – that this song seemed almost trivial. It was uncomfortable.

The singer didn’t seem to notice the reaction, keeping his focus solely on his guitar.

*“His name is Death –
Scary at first glance,
But man, that guy can dance,
Cut a rug and get down!*

*He took his hand,
And he walked on air!
Now this funny pair
Can go paint the town!”*

The singer’s voice softened, becoming more pensive and gentle.

*“Strange though it might seem,
Death is kind:
To sleep, perchance to dream,
You might find
That no nightmare awaits when your life’s at its end,
And you don’t know what wonders lie beyond the bend...
Life is like a rendezvous with a dashing beau,
So might the after-life be the lovely afterglow?
When we come to our turn,
Maybe we will have learned
To stand tall as he did long ago...!”*

The song could have been bad taste. It *should* have been bad taste. Yet as it went on, Harry felt himself smiling through his tears. This wasn’t insensitive at all – it was comforting. Everyone had been so focused on the fact that Dumbledore was gone, never to return...but the man’s song was framing the event differently. Yes, Dumbledore had left them...but he was no longer in pain, as he’d been before his death. He had simply gone on – as Nearly Headless Nick had said after Sirius’s death, he was too brave to stay behind as a ghost...and perhaps because of how Harry had last seen the Headmaster – weak, trembling, and begging for Snape’s mercy in that terrifying,

fragile voice – the image of him suddenly being as strong and happy as he'd been in years past was so welcoming.

The black-haired singer, despite the smile on his lips, was clearly having trouble keeping it together. His blue eyes were filling with tears as his voice grew louder, more passionate.

“His name is Death –

Scary at first glance,

Yet he'll ask you to dance

In the clouds beside him!

He took his hand;

Death's friend he became –

Would you do the same?

Could you abide him?

His name is Death –

When you're called up to dance,

Will you give him a chance?”

He didn't wipe away his tears – he let them flow freely as his eyes gained a fierce gleam.

“His name is Death –

Even You-Know-Who,

Yeah, he'll come for you!”

A silent gasp ran over the spectators, unheard by anyone but felt by all, as the singer's tribute slowly came to an end.

“His name is Death –

When he comes for you, child,

Don't fear him, just smile...

His name is Death –

Just take a breath.

His name is Death –

Your good friend, Death..."

As the song faded away into nothing, the singer turned to Dumbledore's casket, bringing a hand to his lips and then indicating the air over the Headmaster's body. No one spoke – no one moved – not until the singer left the stage and the ceremony official returned, fighting back his own tears, to complete the service. With a burst of ivory flame, Dumbledore's casket was enveloped in a beautiful white marble tomb as the centaurs set loose a dozen arrows over the proceedings and the merpeople sang another miserable refrain.

After the formal service, everyone broke apart, going around to talk with the other guests and grieve openly together. Harry deliberately went to go find the singer, with Ginny, Ron, and Hermione just behind him. He found him talking to Lupin, Tonks, and Terence Goodfellow on the far side. All of them wore black, though Lupin's robes were noticeably threadbare and Goodfellow's were made of leather and satin.

"Excuse me," said Harry. The dashing black-haired man turned around, surprised. "I...wanted to tell you how much I liked your song."

The singer's face spread into a shy smile.

"Thank you," he said. His tone indicated that he was more soft-spoken than his appearance would suggest. "I admit, I was a little nervous, at the start. It's not exactly something you'd play at a funeral..."

"No, but that's why I liked it," said Harry. "Dumbledore...wouldn't have wanted everyone to just be sad – he would've wanted us to feel powerful. Hopeful. ...I think Dumbledore would've really liked what you wrote."

The singer's smile grew sadder. "Coming from you, Potter, that means a lot."

Goodfellow brought his arm around the man's shoulders, and the tail of his magical snake tattoo curled around his wrist as he squeezed the slightly taller man close to his side.

"I'm sure Professor Dumbledore would've been proud to know your first performance was for him, too," the blond-haired reporter said with a wry smile. "He always said that you should be more assertive with your work."

The singer gave a choked laugh.

"Evander's written songs for a while, but often behind the scenes as a collaborator," Goodfellow explained to Harry and the others. "Saint that he is, he's gotten it into his head that he doesn't want fame and fortune, he just wants to help out his musician buddies –"

"Well, I do!" said the man called Evander modestly. "It's just the Hufflepuff way, babe – we don't need the spotlight, we need appreciation –"

"You puffball," murmured Goodfellow playfully under his breath, "you know you'll always get your fair share of appreciation from me –"

He placed a light kiss to the side of Evander's chin. Tonks, whose hair was its old shade of pink again despite her black dress robes, smiled at Lupin, and the two squeezed each other's hands.

"Your lyrics were really well done, Evander," Tonks said kindly. "I can tell you put a lot of thought into them."

Evander smiled. "Thanks, but I can't take all the credit. I couldn't read the *Daily Prophet* as it was full of obituaries, so I took to reading some of the older editions that Terence had saved – the ones his work was featured in, you know – and there was this editorial written a while back about the Death Eaters and the way the Ministry's handled them. It just had this wonderful line – '*we shouldn't simply suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, not when we might take arms against them and end them forever.*'"

"That's R.J. Moon!" said Hermione brightly. "He was referencing *Hamlet*, right?"

“Yes,” Evander said eagerly. “I looked up the entire speech, and...well, it just got me writing! The talk about Death being but sleeping and dreaming reminded me of the Tale of the Three Brothers, where Death is simply greeted as an old friend, and...well, the rest went from there.”

“It’s a great line,” agreed Ron, grinning wryly at Lupin. Lupin, however, didn’t seem phased, instead merely smiling at Evander.

“I believe Professor Dumbledore would’ve enjoyed the reference.”

At that moment, Goodfellow brought an arm around his husband’s pointedly, bending closer to whisper in his ear.

“Evander, love, I believe I see Rufus Scrimgeour over there: might I convince you to accompany me?”

“I guess I can’t let you harass him for an interview on your own,” Evander sighed airily. He nodded politely to the others. “Please excuse us.”

The two strolled away, Goodfellow leading.

“It’s funny he ended up complimenting you to your face without realizing it,” Ginny said to Lupin amusedly.

Lupin blinked in confusion. “What?”

“R.J. Moon,” Ron prompted him. “I mean, sure, it’s clever, but we all knew it was you.”

Lupin and Tonks exchanged a glance. Then Lupin turned back to the four with a wry smile.

“...I hate to disappoint you, but I can’t take credit for those letters.”

“What?” said Ginny, taken aback.

“I’ve been undercover for the whole of a year, living alongside other werewolves who’ve cut themselves off from the rest of the world,” explained Lupin. “In those colonies Owl Post is pretty much non-existent...I was barely able to get away to send any word to the Order, let alone keep up with the *Daily Prophet*.”

“That’s why I was surprised when you brought it up, Ron,” said Tonks. “It would have hurt Remus’s cover, if he’d been regularly sending in editorials to the *Daily Prophet*...and given that he hadn’t even sent word to *us*, it would’ve been out of character. Don’t know who that R.J. Moon person is...but I’ll give them credit, they’ve got a way with words!”

Lupin’s smile softened as the two walked away to go speak with the other guests, leaving the four Gryffindors alone to exchange confused looks amongst each other.

“I said *no comment*,” a sharp voice barked coldly.

“But Minister,” Goodfellow’s voice said persistently, “clearly if Azkaban’s walls have been breached, the people have a right to know – ”

“The Ministry will have its own press release about the matter, and I don’t need you shoving your nose in just to make a headline!” the first voice snarled.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny all turned around. Scrimgeour, flanked by Umbridge and another employee with a nose as long as his sleek dark hair, was purposefully trying to shake off Goodfellow, who was chasing him across the lawn. Just behind Goodfellow was Evander, who looked a little nervous but made no move to silence or calm his husband.

“I may be obnoxious, Minister, but I assure you, I do not seek a scandal,” said Goodfellow. Even though his face appeared genial, his tone grew harder and harder with every sentence. “I simply want to confirm or deny that such a break-out has occurred – if He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s forces did or did not attack the facility in an attempt to break out the Dark wizards captured after the skirmish at Hogwarts – ”

Harry’s heart stopped, but Scrimgeour did not.

“The Ministry will release its findings when the investigation has been completed!”

“But sir,” Goodfellow urged him, his eyes now starting to flash, “a Death’s Head Shell exploded outside the Muggle Prime Minister’s office just this morning – if any of those involved in the attack were freed from Azkaban – !”

“That Death Head’s Shell was inexpertly and prematurely detonated before anyone could be hurt!” Scrimgeour cut him off sharply.

Goodfellow opened his mouth to argue, but Scrimgeour shut him down.

“I’ve had *enough* of your questions, now leave me be or I will have a word with Barnabas Cuffe about keeping his reporters on a *tighter leash*!”

Evander took hold of Goodfellow’s arm as the reporter came to a stop, silently watching the Minister and his aids leave.

“Terence...” murmured Evander, but Goodfellow shook his head.

“He won’t admit it,” he said to his husband quietly, though they were close enough that Harry and the others could still hear him. “Who knows how many more Death Eaters could be back out on the streets now?”

“When you put out an article about it – ”

“It’s no use,” Goodfellow grumbled in frustration, “I haven’t made the front page since my MagicChef report – Barnabas hasn’t liked my articles, and right now the *Daily Prophet* is only interested in mourning Dumbledore. *I know why*,” he said in upset, when Evander opened his mouth to argue, “I’m sad too...but the world doesn’t just stop as soon as someone dies. There’s stuff going on, but no one wants to hear it – everyone’s numbing themselves, because it’s all too much, and it hurts too much...soon – soon nothing we write will mean anything...”

Evander wrapped his arm around Goodfellow, kissing his cheek as he led him away.

“Weasley.”

The four Gryffindors turned, to see McGonagall striding up to them. She was dressed in high-necked black dress robes made of velvet and although her face was very pale, she held herself remarkably well.

“Professor...” started Ron.

She looked at all of them solemnly, as she took a small package out from the inside of her robes. “Professor Ramsay asked me to pass this along to you...I’ve already given the other to Miss Greengrass...”

“Is Ramsay here?” asked Ginny, as Ron took the package.

McGonagall pursed her lips, her expression visibly torn between anger and sadness. “No...he gave this to me before the ceremony, this morning.”

“But – ” said Hermione, looking very upset, “but it’s Dumbledore’s *funeral*! How could he even *think* of not coming?”

“He *hated* Dumbledore, remember?” Harry said harshly. “He doesn’t care that he’s gone.”

Everyone turned to look at him, startled. McGonagall’s face then became oddly gentle.

“No, Potter, he *does* care,” she said quietly, “however difficult it might be for Gordon to show it. Regardless of the bad blood between them, Albus was always fond of Gordon, and Gordon knew that full well. Gordon told me that Albus even apologized to him, before you two left Hogwarts that night.”

This startled Harry. “He apologized?”

“Yes...I don’t believe Gordon forgave him, but Albus did show open regret,” said McGonagall solemnly. “And as much as Gordon has not grieved for Albus as we have, that doesn’t mean he doesn’t care. As long as I’ve known him, Gordon has always had difficulty with grief, even for his friends. He couldn’t bear to attend the impromptu funeral the Ministry held for Peter Pettigrew, back when we thought he was dead, and when James and Lily died, Gordon didn’t visit their

graves until long after everyone else had already left. Even now, even with how fond he was of Alice Longbottom while they were at school, he still has yet to visit her.”

Harry recalled the image of Frank and Alice Longbottom in St. Mungo’s, a shadow of their former selves because of the torture that Bellatrix Lestrange and the Death Eaters had put them through. It had been very difficult to see the pair gliding around the ward like mad ghosts, but Harry considered that it would have to be harder for anyone who actually knew them *before* they’d been cursed so badly. Even their son Neville, who hadn’t but loved them very much, had difficulty talking about them or their condition to anyone.

“Dumbledore would’ve wanted Ramsay to be here,” Ginny said fiercely.

McGonagall surveyed her sadly over her glasses. “Yes. Sadly this is not the first time that Gordon has had to disappoint Albus.”

She glanced at Harry one last time, before turning and walking back toward Professors Flitwick and Sprout.

With a quick look around at the others, Ron opened the package. Inside were a short note and a huge pile of gold Galleons.

Ron,

Here are your earnings for the MagicChef contest: 5000 in full. Astoria has gotten the same amount. You both have thoroughly earned it.

I can’t act as though the world isn’t going to become scarier and soon, but when and if everything gets resolved, you, your family, and your friends will always be welcome at Hell’s Kitchen.

Stay safe,

Gordon Ramsay

Harry knew it would be his last time at Hogwarts. Now that Dumbledore was gone, he was the only one who could hunt down Voldemort’s remaining Horcruxes. So as he settled down in a

compartment on the Hogwarts Express, he took out the Marauder's Map and looked over his old haunts. He looked over each hallway, and he recalled all of the wonderful days and terrifying adventures.

'That room's where Firenze's been holding his classes,' he thought as he gazed at the Map. 'I wonder if he still has it transfigured to look like it's outside. And over there is where Fred and George put the Portable Swamp...even Flitwick said it was really good magic. The library...there Millicent offered to help me with Potions, and Ginny brought me a chocolate Easter egg, and I snuck into the Restricted Section looking for information on the Philosopher's Stone...'

His eyes found the hallway he'd run down to escape Filch after nearly getting caught in that act, and as he watched the empty hallway, he suddenly felt like he was back under his Invisibility Cloak, small enough to actually fit under it without crouching. He remembered coming around that hallway, hearing voices – trying to stay super quiet as he listened in on a black-robed, bat-like teacher threatening a smaller man in a purple turban –

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrel."

Harry clenched his teeth, his green eyes filling up with angry tears. Back then he'd known Snape was no good – he'd *always* known Snape was no good – and yet Dumbledore just *refused* to see it – and now –

"Him believing there was good in Snape may have been a mistake, but it's not something he should've lost his life for!"

Furious by the memory both of Snape and Ramsay, Harry put down the Map, turning to the window. Through the glass he saw Arjuna and Astoria hugging tightly, crying as they looked out upon the Hogwarts grounds together.

"Arjuna's not coming back."

Harry looked up at Ron, who was also looking grimly out the window at the two of them.

"Her father sent a letter saying her mother's gotten very sick and she'll be staying at home to care for her," Ron said lowly. "But Arjuna knows her father only wrote that because the mail's being watched, and he probably wants both her and her mum to go into hiding. And Cho's going abroad; she and Marietta were supposed to join the Ministry here after graduating, but...well, Cho's father

was able to transfer to New York City, and he was able to wrangle a work visa for Cho too...”

“Considering what’s going on, I don’t blame them for not staying,” Hermione said softly. “You heard what Goodfellow said, about that attack outside the Prime Minister’s office. It’s just lucky the Shell went off before that person could get inside, who knows how many Muggles might have died otherwise...?”

Harry’s stomach lurched uncomfortably. “...Astoria’s coming back, though?”

“Yeah – she decided she has to risk it, to take her OWLS next year,” said Ron. “She needs those to get the job she wants and she would feel bad leaving Daphne behind...and, well, even if she’s got the money to move out now, she knows that money can’t buy a place that’d keep her safe from the Death Eaters. No amount of money can afford that...”

Harry nodded glumly, his eyes still lingering on Arjuna and Astoria. They looked heartbroken – and, Harry thought, why wouldn’t they be? He’d never had to consider spending a whole year at school without Ron or Hermione...

Hermione sat down next to Harry and took his hand, her brown eyes drifting down to the Marauder’s Map in his lap. She then blinked in surprise.

“...Harry...there’s someone at Dumbledore’s tomb.”

Startled, Harry scanned the parchment until he found one lone dot by the Black Lake.

Gordon Ramsay.

‘So he did decide to go see Dumbledore,’ thought Harry. ‘He just waited until everyone else had left...like with my mum and dad...’

He watched the dot for a long moment. Then, folding the Marauder’s Map and putting it away in his robes, he looked back up at the castle.

Who knew when he would see those beautiful towers and the shining Lake again? Who knew

when he'd walk those halls again? Who knew *if* he would ever see Hogwarts again?

Gordon Ramsay traveled home by Floo Powder that evening, after almost everyone else had left. His fiancée, Tana Hutcheson, had greeted him with a hot dinner of ham, mashed potatoes, and roast chicken and butterbean casserole, and the two spent the evening together, trying desperately to fight back the emotional chill in the air with warm, delicious food. They knew there would be a lot to discuss - their fates, their employees' fates, their business's fate - but for now, they knew they both just needed each other, and a little bit of peace.

It had been a pleasant evening. Even as Tana and Ramsay cleaned up and started stacking dishes into the sink, there was an air of docile normalcy that could make one forget, at least for a little while, how miserable and terrifying and uncertain the world was.

As Tana washed the dishes and Ramsay dried, Ramsay kept trying to kiss Tana on the cheek and mouth; after the third time, Tana squirmed away, smirking playfully.

“Gordon, let me finish these,” she said in tired amusement.

“I will, after I get one more kiss,” Ramsay replied cheekily.

Tana splashed him with some water from the sink. Ramsay laughed.

Their enjoyment was interrupted, however, when the doorbell rang.

Tana stiffened slightly, her brows furrowing as her eyes darted to her wand on the counter, but Ramsay rested a hand on her shoulder gently and squeezed it, before he walked out of the kitchen toward the front door.

When he opened the door, however, he found nobody there. All he saw was a white Turkish Angora cat standing on his doormat, trembling all over and looking up at him with its gray eyes.

Ramsay blinked, confused, at the cat. Then, in less than five seconds, the cat had disappeared, to be replaced with a very skinny, deathly pale young man dressed all in black with light blond hair

and terror in his eyes.

“...Hello...Professor,” said Draco Malfoy.

Draco Turns

Ramsay at first was so stunned that he didn't move or say a word, merely staying stock-still in the doorway of his house. Then, when he recovered himself, his first thought was to grab his wand, but it was complicated by the fact that his and Tana's house was in a Muggle neighborhood. His eyes darted around, looking for any witnesses, and when he did so, Malfoy took the opportunity to speak again.

"I'm not here to fight!" he said very quickly, holding his hands up to show he wasn't armed. "Please!"

Ramsay's sharp blue eyes flared with both anxiety and anger as they darted from Malfoy to around at the quiet neighboring houses.

"Not here to fight?" he repeated coldly. "Then what *are* you here for – to deliver a message from You-Know-Who? I'm afraid I've never aligned myself with the Order, so you're at the wrong house."

Malfoy seemed to shrink under Ramsay's gaze, almost like he was a turtle going back into its shell.

"No – no, I'm – the Dark Lord doesn't know I'm here – no one does – please – "

Ramsay's expression softened just enough to look confused. He had been angry to see Malfoy's face; even if he had not mourned Dumbledore as everyone else had, it didn't change his outrage at seeing the student who had betrayed Hogwarts to the Death Eaters, and in doing so was partly responsible for what had ensued.

"I – I need help," Malfoy said very quietly.

Ramsay frowned, his eyebrows coming tightly over his eyes. Malfoy continued very quickly, muttering frantically under his breath as though terrified he wouldn't be able to get all of the words out.

"F-Father – the Dark Lord sent Bellatrix and a few others to attack Azkaban – to try to get Yaxley and the others out – only – only the attack failed. They only got two men out before the Aurors arrived: Montmercay and my father. The Dark Lord was...angry, *very* angry – Montmercay's magic

isn't that strong, and my father – the Dark Lord is still angry with him. He sent Father on a mission to *redeem* himself – to deliver a Death's Head Shell to the Muggle Prime Minister's office, in person – ”

Ramsay gave a start. He hadn't heard *that* news.

“I d-don't know what happened, but – but the Shell went off too soon! Father had been holding it – h-he was able to Disapparate back home, but – ”

Malfoy's lip was trembling.

“Th-the Dark Lord – he turned away! Refused to help him – b-because Father's failed him too many times! And Snape is away on another mission – he won't be back at Headquarters until tomorrow – ”

The mention of Snape was a knife in Ramsay's back and made him clench his jaw furiously.

“No one else will help, since the Dark Lord won't...M-Mother's trying to heal him on her own, but – nothing she does is working – ”

Malfoy's face was as white as a sheet. He reached out a hand as if preparing to seize Ramsay's arm, but resisted the urge, which made him clutch at the air.

“You – you said that your offer still stood, if I needed help,” he said, his face alight with a kind of demented hope as his lips curled up in a weak half-smile. “You're the only person I could think of, who might – people say you're a prodigy at Potions – you would know how to counter Death's Head acid – ”

“You want the help of a *'filthy Mudblood?'*” Ramsay asked him, raising an eyebrow.

Malfoy's gray eyes widened as his half-smile vanished. His face twitched like he was having a silent fit.

“If – if you're not going to help, then just *say* so!” he bellowed, his voice shaking with fury and pain as it grew louder. “Do you – do you think this is *easy* for me to come here, after what I've done – to show my face to *anyone*, let alone you?! You don't think I *hate* myself for what I've

done – what I was *unable* to do?! I was too cowardly to do the *one thing* that could've redeemed my father in the Dark Lord's eyes, and now because of my failure, the Dark Lord won't save him! Don't you think that I hate that the man I was assigned to kill – a man I've hated my whole life, for being a Muggle lover – actually tried to offer *my* family help?! *Mine*?! You don't think I hate that everything I was ever told about the Dark Lord – how he'd save the Wizarding World from the Mudbloods and blood traitors when he returned, bring it back to its former glory – that my father would help him do it – that it was an *honor* to be chosen, to join the Dark Lord and become one of his soldiers – become strong enough to rival Death himself – a *Death Eater* – that everything I ever thought I knew is *wrong*?! Don't rub it in my face, you – !”

His voice cracked. The suspicion in Ramsay's face flickered and died.

“...He's really dying?” the former-professor whispered.

Malfoy gave a weak nod.

“*Please*,” he said, and it sounded like the words were physically injuring him. “I'll do anything – just – *please*, save him – ”

Ramsay suddenly became aware of Tana coming up alongside him. He turned to look at her over his shoulder as she took his hand. Her brown eyes were narrowed in concern, both for him and for the boy standing on their doorstep – she'd clearly heard every word.

Finally, Ramsay gave a single, silent nod. With a sigh, Tana raised a wand. A moment later a small black bag and a white purse had descended from downstairs and levitated themselves into her hands.

“Let's go, then,” she said quietly. “We don't have any time to lose.”

Draco had to use Side-Along-Apparition to bring Ramsay, and then Tana, to Malfoy Manor, as he could not bring them both at the same time. It was remarkable how well he managed it, given his lack of interest in study the previous year; Ramsay suspected that the Malfoys might have given their son informal Apparition classes at home.

The three strode quickly and purposefully up the grounds, with the magical gate becoming as

translucent as smoke with just a touch of Draco's hand. The front door of the Manor opened just as instantly as soon as Draco stepped within a foot of it.

"I suppose the house has Familial Sensory Enchantments?" said Ramsay in mild interest.

Draco nodded without looking at either of them. "It responds to the three of us – Father, Mother, and me. Most everyone else would have to open them with magic."

"And I suppose you'd know as soon as they did?" asked Tana. Unlike Ramsay, she kept her hand firmly on her wand inside her jean pocket.

Draco nodded again, indicating the chandelier overhead. Three candles were lit at the top, and two along the bottom edge.

"The top three green candles represent our family," explained Draco. "The white ones on the lower levels light up for every additional person that comes through the Manor gate. We have one on each floor of the house, so we always know when someone arrives or leaves..."

"Draco?!"

At that very moment, a scared voice of a woman echoed from somewhere upstairs.

"Mother!" called Draco. "I'm here, Mother, it's me!"

He dashed up the stairs, Ramsay and Tana at his heels. They passed several closed doors before reaching a room at the end of the hall that must have been the master bedroom. It was beautifully decorated like the rest of the house with intricately carved dark wood furniture and extravagant dark blue draperies, but this one also held a lot of magical photographs, most of which held a much younger-looking Draco.

Narcissa Malfoy was sitting beside the bed, where her husband was resting. The white silk linens had been trashed – they were covered in blood and yellowish-green acid that ate away at the seams. Lucius Malfoy himself looked even worse than the bed. Both of his arms from the elbow down were gone, and only bony remnants of his forearms remained. A large hole was eating its way through his left calf, and there was a terrible gash in his neck that was foaming yellow-green. Lucius was flushed, dead-eyed, and shaking violently despite being only semi-conscious.

When Narcissa saw her son, she immediately ran forward, throwing her arms around him.

“Draco! What were you *thinking*, leaving the house? You could’ve been – ”

Her words stilled in her throat when her eyes landed on Tana and Ramsay.

“*You!*” she cried, her eyes narrowing on Ramsay fiercely. She whipped out her wand at once, pointing it at them. “What are you doing in my house?!”

“Mother!” Draco grabbed her arm. “Mother, I brought them!”

“*What?*” Narcissa whispered, shocked.

“Professor Ramsay’s good at Potions,” Draco said urgently. He glanced back at Ramsay over his shoulder anxiously. “He said he’d help – ”

“*Did* he?” Narcissa spat, thoroughly unconvinced. “What reason would he have to help Lucius – to help *us*?”

Lucius gave a terrible, muffled yowl of pain that sounded like an animal getting shot. Narcissa immediately ran back over to her husband, her face very white and scared.

“I’m here, Lucius,” she tried to soothe him desperately.

She trailed her wand up and down the bones of his half-there arm, trying to heal the damage, but they kept slowly dissolving despite her best efforts.

Ramsay’s eyes narrowed slightly as he came up alongside Narcissa, the black bag in one hand and his wand in the other.

“*Accio dittany*,” he muttered.

Once he had the bottle of dittany in his hand, he put the bag down on the bed beside the wounded Lucius and began pouring a little bit of it onto the wound in Lucius's neck.

"What are you doing?" Narcissa demanded, her face stricken.

"Dittany will help slow the damage," Ramsay said calmly. He turned to Draco. "I could use some washcloths or handkerchiefs, so we can apply this into the crevices."

Draco nodded weakly and dashed from the room. Ramsay brought a hand up to Lucius's sweaty forehead to feel his temperature.

"He's on fire," he mumbled. "107, at least..."

Tana came over to Ramsay's side, materializing water in mid-air and then freezing it into ice cubes. Then, taking out a light blue handkerchief from her purse, she wrapped the ice up into a little bundle and started applying it to Lucius's sweaty forehead. The elder Malfoy gave a shudder in response, his eyes rolling up into his head as he gave a low moan.

Ramsay looked up at Narcissa, who was shaking from head-to-toe in a kind of anger that was clearly fear in disguise.

"I won't lie to you, Narcissa," he said, keeping his voice level despite the urgency of the situation, "Lucius is in *very* bad shape. If he'd gotten help when the acid first landed on him, then this would be a lot easier. We're going to have to apply dittany to his wounds regularly for a good while, and even then, we may not be able to heal all of the damage. Our top priority will be the one on his neck – if his windpipe is severed, it'll be very hard to save him. Until then, we must keep his temperature down at all costs – the infection and fever can often kill long before the acid does – "

Narcissa watched, dumbfounded, as Ramsay applied some more dittany to Lucius's neck. When Draco arrived with several pieces of cloth in hand, Ramsay took them from him and began to pour dittany onto each of them.

"Tana, can you apply this one to his leg?"

“Yes,” said Tana with a firm nod, taking the cloth from her fiancée and started to dab at the hole eating through Lucius’s calf.

“Narcissa, his arms.”

Ramsay offered a cloth to her. Narcissa stared at it, frozen.

“*Narcissa*,” Ramsay said again, a little more urgently.

“Mother,” said Draco, his voice much softer than Ramsay’s but no less tense.

Narcissa, still looking stunned, took the cloth from Ramsay and started to likewise dab at the edge of Lucius’s right arm.

“Apply it every thirty seconds until the pain subsides,” Ramsay murmured. “We don’t just want to halt the spread of damage, we want to repair what’s been hurt...”

The three adults applied dittany to Lucius’s wounds for hours. It was exhausting and grueling work; Draco would have to regularly go fetch new pieces of cloth, whether towels, handkerchiefs, or even just pieces he’d torn out of the curtains, as the acid would melt through the dittany-glazed fabric after a while. It didn’t help how much Lucius was clearly suffering during the whole ordeal; often he would cry out in disoriented pain, babbling fragmented words no one could understand. Despite how difficult it was for her, however, Narcissa kept her composure and kept applying dittany to Lucius’s wounds, even when tears would leak from her eyes and streak silently down her face.

“Gordon, it’s no use,” whispered Tana after four hours. “The acid’s taken away almost all of his knee – the flesh is all rotted...”

Ramsay looked down in dismay at the yellowish pus rippling out of the gash-like wound. Lucius’s left leg was only held together by about a foot’s worth of flesh and bone, and even that was burned and melted like bloody, sickening tar.

“We’ll need to amputate,” Tana said grimly.

“*What?*” cried Narcissa, looking horrified.

“It’s the only way to save the rest of the leg,” Tana said urgently. “The infection will only get worse otherwise...it’ll spread up and out, if it’s given the chance.”

“You’re right,” Ramsay murmured. When Narcissa opened her mouth to argue, he cut her off, “Tana has taught incoming Healers for almost five years – I assure you, she wouldn’t recommend this if it wasn’t necessary.”

Narcissa looked helplessly from Ramsay to Tana. Then her eyes landed on Draco, who looked even whiter and more scared than she was, and she steadied her jaw.

“...Very well, then,” she said quietly.

Tana turned to Ramsay. “He’ll need a Sleeping Draught.”

“I’ll brew one,” said Ramsay. “Take over his neck for me.”

Once Lucius was asleep, Tana instructed Narcissa to hold Lucius’s leg still while she carefully applied the incisions. It was difficult for Ramsay to maintain the dittany regiment while Tana and Narcissa worked – he literally had to apply cloth to multiple injuries at the same time, switching hands frequently. Finally it got to the point that Draco picked up one of the dittany-soaked curtain fragments himself and came up on his father’s other side.

“I’ve...got it,” he said.

Ramsay stared as Draco began to dab weakly at the end of his father’s left arm. The poor boy looked nauseous and pale – as if it was taking all of his energy to keep himself from throwing up. Ramsay felt pity prickling at the sides of his heart.

“Draco, you don’t – ” he started gently, but Draco glared fiercely at him.

“I’ve got it,” he repeated, even though his voice was shaky with the effort of him trying to steady his stomach.

Ramsay looked Draco in the eye for a long moment, but relented, returning to applying the dittany to Lucius’s neck and right arm while Draco worked at Lucius’s left arm.

Her face very pale, Narcissa reached a hand over Lucius’s frame and took her son’s hand, squeezing it gently. Draco looked up at his mother, their two identically stoic faces trying and failing to contain the fear, grief, and uncertainty that they so wished they could hide.

At long last, after almost seven hours, Lucius’s wounds were healed. By the end, he had lost almost all of his arms, his right leg from the knee down was gone, and there was an empty, jagged hole that cut through the side of his neck and collarbone. But he was alive – really, truly alive – and when he awoke and his gray eyes trailed over his wife and son’s worried faces, Draco and Narcissa both immediately brought their arms around him and held him tightly, as tears started flooding from Lucius’s eyes.

“I’m sorry – ” he murmured incoherently. “I’m sorry – I failed – ”

“Shh,” whispered Narcissa, bringing a hand through his long hair. “No...no, Lucius...”

“I failed the Dark Lord,” mumbled Lucius. “I failed you – ”

“No,” Narcissa said again, a little more firmly despite her soft volume. “No, Lucius. You did everything you were expected to do – it’s not your fault the Shell went off too soon, you’ve never had to dirty your hands with garbage like that in the past...the Dark Lord knew that...” Her eyes flared angrily as her voice became more venomous. “He knew that, yet he punished you for not being expert at it...”

Lucius tried to sit up, but found himself off-kilter. He looked around at the room, noting the bloody and acid-ruined bed sheets before realizing what was missing. When he did, all of the color drained

from his face.

“The acid nearly killed you,” Narcissa said quietly. “We saved what we could...”

Lucius looked at his wife, his face as pallid as a corpse’s and his gray eyes very wide.

“‘We...?’” he said shakily.

Narcissa bit the side of her lip uncomfortably, glancing over her shoulder. Lucius followed her gaze and for the first time laid eyes on Tana and Ramsay. Ramsay was wiping his hands clean of blood and dittany with a wet towel.

“Morning, Lucius,” said Ramsay levelly.

Lucius’s eyes narrowed sharply. “*You* – how did you – !?”

“I brought him, Father,” Draco interjected sharply.

Lucius looked at his son in horror and disbelief.

“He was the only one who could help you,” Draco continued lowly, his eyes drawn down to the floor. “The Dark Lord sent Snape away – and I knew no one else would or could help...so I begged Ramsay to come. And he did – even though it could’ve been a trap, even though he didn’t have time to tell anyone where he was going or why...he still came.”

It sounded as though Draco was just as confused by all of this as Narcissa and Lucius were. Lucius and Narcissa both looked up at Ramsay, who was smiling slightly.

“I may hate your beliefs, Lucius,” the former-professor said coolly, “and I may hate your loyalties. I may hate what you’ve done and how many people you’ve hurt. I may even hate you. But I do not hate your son...and your son clearly loves you more than anything. He came to my door for help because no one else could give it to him...and damn me if I’ll ever turn away someone who sincerely needs my help.”

Lucius's eyes ran over Ramsay's face critically.

"Admirable sentiment," he said coldly. "And what, exactly, do you expect to get in return for your charity, Ramsay?"

Ramsay shrugged. "Charity with strings is not charity – though I would hope that Tana and I would be allowed to leave your house unharmed, considering we just saved your life."

Lucius bared his teeth in something like a halfhearted sneer, but looked away, unable to respond. Narcissa brought a hand through his hair.

"That is a boon we can spare," she said quietly.

"Then we'll take our leave," said Ramsay, inclining his head in a respectful nod toward Narcissa.

He turned to Tana and offered her his arm. She took it with a weak smile, brushing her brown hair from her eyes with her other hand. Ramsay then glanced at Draco.

"To make sure we're clear," he said, "the offer I made is not a one-time favor. If you still need help...I can provide it. All you have to do is ask."

Draco watched Ramsay and Tana stroll out the bedroom door, feeling a loss for words. They had just saved his father's life, no questions asked, and expected absolutely *nothing* in return – hell, Ramsay was even offering *more*. And to a boy who had openly scorned him and who came from a family who considered people like him inferior...

"I'll need to get some replacement limbs, as soon as possible," murmured Lucius, "before the Dark Lord returns..."

Narcissa looked stricken. "Lucius, you *cannot* return to his service! Not after what he's done to you!"

“Narcissa, our house is his Headquarters,” said Lucius. “I must.”

“You nearly *died!*”

“As long as I’m alive, I must serve!” Lucius argued, though his voice wasn’t passionate about the thought. “When I was Marked, that was the oath I made!”

Narcissa’s eyes were burning with rage.

“Lucius, that man – that *monster* – was willing to stand back and watch you die! He *Marked your son* and sent him on a mission to kill one of the most powerful wizards in the world – *yes, Lucius, Dumbledore was that!* – all while knowing Draco could never succeed! That so-called Lord does not *deserve* your loyalty – *our* loyalty!”

“Narcissa, *please!*” whispered Lucius, his voice rough with anxiety.

He couldn’t take her hand, so he settled with bringing his head down on her shoulder, trying to comfort her.

“...I know, my darling,” he murmured, as Narcissa gave a quiet choke. “I know you’re frightened...I am too. But we don’t have a choice. We cannot run from this – from him. Even if we tried, we would just end up like Igor Karkaroff – killed in some back-alley in the dead of night, and being stumbled upon by perfect strangers post-mortem. We could never run far enough, or hide well enough. As long as we’re alive...we must serve.”

There was a silence.

“...Then...the Dark Lord must think you’re dead.”

Lucius and Narcissa both looked up, shocked, at Draco. His head was bowed and his eyes were in shadow.

“The Dark Lord *expected* you to die,” said Draco quietly. It felt horrible to say it aloud, even if they all knew it was true. “He said you’d failed him enough times – he’s had enough. If you live,

he'll just keep hurting you...hurting *us* in order to hurt you. If we hide you...if we say you're dead...then he'll get what he wants. He'll feel like he's won."

Lucius looked horrified. "Draco – you can't mean – "

Draco raised his head. His gray eyes were narrowed and blazing.

"In order to save all of us, Father," he said solemnly, "*you* must hide. Alone."

The Kransimir Scrapbooks

Daphne awoke the morning of July 19th to a strange rapping sound. Shoving her long dark hair out of her eyes, she groggily inched out of bed, yanking the hangings of her four-poster bed open and looking vaguely around the room for the source of the noise.

Her room, like the rest of Greengrass Hall, was very old. The white brick walls had no plaster or wood to smooth over the edges or crevices, and the white furniture was distinctly elegant and formal, rather than anything comfortable. Her white-dressed four-poster bed took up most of the small room, only leaving just enough space for an armless chair and footstool, a very tiny desk that held Daphne's stacked schoolbooks, and two small end tables decked with candles. Were it not for the magical photographs, the hand-painted tzedakah box on the end table, and the hand-folded paper flowers and garlands that Daphne had put up, one would've thought the room hadn't been occupied in a good couple hundred years. There were also two windows in the room, which let in the early morning sun – it was from the left window closer to her bed, Daphne realized at last, that the rapping noise had originated. There was a Great Horned owl sitting on her windowsill.

Despite her lingering tiredness, Daphne quickly bustled over to the window. By design, her parents' bedchambers were just below her and Astoria's rooms, and they were light sleepers – she did *not* want them to hear that an owl had arrived, or else they would demand to see the contents of whatever mail she'd received.

The owl flapped into the room, plopping a large package onto Daphne's bed. With its burden delivered, it settled itself on her pillow and preened its feathers.

Daphne brought a gentle hand along the bird's back to praise it and then picked up the package. On the front, written in elegant penmanship, were the words:

Daphne Greengrass

The Room with Two Windows

Greengrass Hall

North Yorkshire, England

Her eyes lit up at the sight of the familiar handwriting and she hurried to unwrap it. She had only just ripped open the corner, however, when a quiet knock echoed from her door.

Her heart beating with anxiety, Daphne quickly stowed the package under her bed, and waved her arm frantically at the owl to make it take off.

“Shoo!” she hissed.

The owl, looking faintly disgruntled, nonetheless flew back outside. Daphne shut the window behind it; then she snatched up her white dressing gown, put it on, and bustled over to her bedroom door, fixing the best “innocent” expression she could onto her face.

When she opened the door, however, she wasn’t faced with either of her parents, but with her sister.

“*Astoria*,” Daphne exhaled heavily, relaxing significantly.

Daphne and Astoria’s fashion preferences couldn’t have been more different, and their nightwear was no exception. Daphne had always gravitated more toward soft fabrics and lace, but Astoria was content just wearing an oversized black Weird Sisters T-shirt to bed. It was a far cry from the white dressing gown and light blue satin nightgown Daphne wore.

Astoria gave a weak smile as Daphne shooed her inside and closed the door.

“I thought I heard something at your window,” she said sheepishly.

“Hopefully you were the only one,” Daphne sniffed coolly. Despite her words, her lips were curled up in a small smirk. “...It’s just as well, though. If this package is what I think it is, you might be just as pleased as I am...”

Astoria blinked curiously as Daphne bent down and pulled the package back out from under her bed. The two sisters sat on the floor together as Daphne unwrapped it, putting aside a folded letter on the bed so she could open the box it had been attached to.

Inside was an assortment of new scrapbooks, all with leather covers of different colors and each personalized with a different letter stitched in gold on the bottom right corner. Daphne’s closed smirk spread from ear to ear as she took out one of the scrapbooks – a gray-covered book with a gold cursive letter “A” on it – and handed it to Astoria.

“*This* one is yours,” she said smugly.

Astoria stared from the book to Daphne and back. “What – ?”

Then her light blue eyes widened.

“The scrapbook you gave Ron – !” she realized excitedly.

“This is the newest edition of the Kransimir scrapbook,” Daphne said, nodding in satisfaction as she took out the other scrapbooks one by one. “They are all linked together, so anyone whose name is written into the cover will be able to see whatever anyone else puts in. The manufacturer told me he’d try to have them ready in time for my birthday – now I’ll just have to send these others out to their respective owners, and we’ll be able to re-establish our link. I figured with the lack of mail security, we could use these...”

Astoria looked over the books one by one: canary yellow, violet, orange, teal, pink, burgundy, navy blue, lavender, red, and forest green.

“Hannah,” she said slowly, as her eyes ran over each initial, “Millicent, Ron...Kevin...Rose, Owen...Arjuna...Cho, Colin...Bridget...”

“And me,” Daphne finished, putting her own pearl-white copy embellished with a gold “D” down on the floor before she opened the letter and read it.

Astoria opened her gray scrapbook, looking over the cover and pages. On the inside was engraved the full names of all twelve MagicChef contestants in sparkling gold calligraphy:

Daphne Shayna Greengrass

Astoria Charna Greengrass

Bridget Rhapsody Jaheem

Millicent Joan Bulstrode

Ronald Bilius Weasley

Colin Lewis Creevey

Hannah Mae Abbott

Kevin Elijah Whitby

Owen Duane Cauldwell

Rose Amalie Zeller

Cho An Chang

Arjuna Mirai Belaji

“These are *beautiful*, Daphne,” Astoria said admiringly. “There’s so much care, so much detail... this ‘*manufacturer*’ of yours is quite an artist.”

Daphne smiled proudly, her brown eyes still on the letter in her hands. “Yes...yes, he is.”

She deliberately ignored the questioning look in her younger sister’s eyes as she folded the letter back up and shoved it under her pillow.

“I’ll need to send these out quickly, before Mother and Father can see them,” she said primly, as she got up, walked over to her desk, and fetched parchment, ink, wrapping paper, and a quill. “Since you’re awake, would you mind giving me a hand?”

Astoria grinned. “Of course not.”

After a delicious birthday breakfast of blueberry-compote-filled crepes, Daphne opened her presents (a modest pearl necklace from her parents and a new cookbook from Astoria). Then, lying to their parents that they were going to get to work on their summer homework, the two sisters smuggled Astoria’s gray scrapbook outside alongside their textbooks, quills, and ink and headed out into the courtyard.

Greengrass Hall had originally been constructed back in the 14th century, and the Greengrasses had made very few structural alterations to the house over the years. It wasn’t as large or grand as many other Pureblood-owned homes Daphne and Astoria had visited, like the Parkinson Estate, Bulstrode House, or Malfoy Manor; it had lower ceilings and modest wood banisters and was generally very sterile with its white-dominated color scheme. Greengrass Hall’s most interesting design element, however, was its layout. Although there were two additional floors at the back of the house, the sides of the house stretched a ways off of the main structure and came together to

create a large circular wall around the property, making it look more like a fortress than a simple manor. Outside the ramparts of Greengrass Hall was a small moat, and at the center of the stone, bagel-shaped manor was a moderately sized, neatly trimmed courtyard, with one large, beautiful willow tree planted right in the middle. Daphne had always wanted to add more flowers and hedges to the courtyard, but her parents preferred the “cleaner” look (so as to see whatever their daughters might be doing on the grounds at any given time) and so dissuaded her from planting anything else.

It was under this willow tree that Daphne and Astoria settled themselves, laying their books, parchment, and ink on the grass beside them.

“I can’t remember the last time we sat under this tree together,” Astoria said with a smile.

Daphne glanced up at the hanging branches absently.

“...It certainly has been a while,” she granted quietly. “Before Hogwarts, at least.”

Astoria leaned back against the trunk of the tree, her smile widening enough to show her teeth. “I’m glad we’re doing it again.”

Daphne’s lips curled up in the slightest of smiles. “Me too.”

Picking up Astoria’s scrapbook, she opened it to the first page, dipped her quill in some ink, and began to write, Astoria looking over her shoulder as she did so.

Hello, everyone,

Astoria and I are using her scrapbook at the moment, though I made sure to get us each our own, so that we can both read and write entries while we’re at school. We’re writing under the willow tree on the grounds so as to have some privacy; Mother and Father think we’re taking advantage of the nice weather to work on our summer homework outside.

On the note of Father, I suspect that things are not going well at the Ministry. He has been very close-lipped about work, as usual, yet he seems oddly on-edge whenever Mother asks him about his coworkers. Ron, Owen, Arjuna, Rose, Kevin, perhaps since you have family in the Ministry, you might know the source of his anxiety? I can’t help but be worried.

Hope that all of you are doing well! If you send anything, please be discreet – I would prefer it if Mother and Father did not intercept my mail.

Love from

Daphne

Over the course of the next few hours, the letters came in one by one. As each one slowly appeared, Daphne and Astoria took turns reading each line to each other under their breath.

Daphne and Astoria,

It's so good to hear from you! I was so happy to receive your scrapbook and letter. I particularly like the color you chose for my cover, Daphne – it reminds me of this one David Bowie T-shirt Dad picked up for me.

To your question, I'm afraid you're right to be suspicious. I overheard Mum telling Dad last night that the Head of Magical Law Enforcement, Pius Thicknesse, has instructed her and the rest of the Auror Department to investigate a large number of witches and wizards who have recently been labeled as potential threats. Mum said that most of them are suspected Guilders, so I suppose it's not as bad as it sounds, but I must admit, Mum didn't look very comfortable about it. Perhaps because your parents are suspected of sympathizing with the Death Eaters, they've been given extra scrutiny? Even if so, though, your parents aren't Death Eaters, and having certain beliefs isn't a crime, so there's nothing the Ministry could do to your parents even if they wanted to. Please don't worry – I'm sure everything will sort itself out.

Wallace is very happy to be home. Here's a picture of him enjoying the sunshine next to my window. He loves sitting in the flowerbox on the sill, but we just had some new neighbors move into the unit across the way and I don't know their schedule well enough yet to make sure they're not home while he's in there. Fortunately they're supposed to be pretty nice. Mum teased me that they have a 16-year-old son who's pretty cute, but I was able to get her back by throwing a pillow at her face. (Don't worry, she wasn't mad – she and Dad were laughing the whole time!)

Your present should hopefully arrive by tonight, Daphne: hope you like it, and happy birthday!

Kevin

Happy birthday, Daphne! Your present's on its way; I only just finished it a few minutes ago. Mum needed some extra help today – two of her servers called out with the flu, and another one had to leave early to go pick up her daughter, as her ex-husband apparently forgot that it was his turn to

look after her after football practice. (I had some fun imagining the guy's face was every single dirty dish I was spraying with boiling hot water in the sink.)

I know how you feel about your parents teasing you, Kevin; Mum tries to hook me up with just about every cute girl who strolls through the door. I don't really mind, though – she has good taste a lot of the time. It's just tricky to date any Muggle girls when I'm away so much of the year and I can't send that many letters! Plus it's a bit harder to find girls interested in dating other girls in the Muggle World anyway.

I hope the best for your father, Daphne and Astoria. It seems like the Ministry should have bigger fish to fry than people who believe stupid things but don't act on them, but I know sense isn't exactly something the Ministry has a lot of.

Love,

Bridget

You're bloody brilliant, Daphne – these scrapbooks are just what we need, given everything that's going on! I'm so glad you were able to get us these.

I asked Dad about work, and he said that Scrimgeour has been noticeably on-edge lately. He recently put out a press release about a minor attack at Azkaban's walls, but accented firmly how the Death Eaters taken down by the Aurors at Hogwarts were all still in captivity. Dad can't help but think that his word choice might be significant, though; he heard rumors that two Death Eaters are unaccounted for. We also heard Terence Goodfellow mention an attack on the Muggle Prime Minister's office at Dumbledore's funeral and he, at least, suspected that one of those missing Death Eaters could be involved. From the sound of things, I reckon the attempted break-in shook Scrimgeour up and he's trying to get control of the situation by capturing any Guilders or Death Eaters he can get his hands on.

Hermione will be staying with us for a while. She had to wipe her parents' memories and send them into hiding given what's been happening, and there's no way in Hell I'd ever let her stay at the Leaky Cauldron when our house is always open. Harry should hopefully be joining us by the end of the month too, once the Order has figured out what to do with his Muggle aunt and uncle. I really can't wait until Harry turns 17 and doesn't have to ever go back to them again; they've always been pretty rotten to him. Bill also wanted to make sure that Harry will be able to come to his and Fleur's wedding in August.

I mentioned to Mum that it was your birthday, Daphne, and she insisted on helping me with your present. I apologize in advance for Errol – I had to use him instead of Pig, as he was too small to carry our package. Hopefully he'll get your presents to you in one piece.

Talk to you soon!

Ron

Happy birthday, Daphne!

Hope your 17th is a lot of fun! I'm sorry we won't be able to get together and have a party, but maybe the first week of term we can have an informal one in the kitchens? Then we can celebrate Rose's birthday too!

It's been quiet at home. A lot of Dad's clients have gone into hiding, so a lot of the concerts and auditions he organized had to be canceled, which really disappointed him. I've tried to keep his spirits up here at home by getting him to help me bake – he even helped with the birthday cake I sent you, Daphne! He wishes you a happy 17th too.

By the way, I laughed reading your letter, Bridget – Dad does the same thing with his clients! Once I had a crush on this one new singer at his talent agency, right? So he and the singer's mum tried to hook us up on a date...only, they didn't even realize she was already dating somebody! So the two of us just spent the entire date at the café laughing about what bad matchmakers our parents are!!

I've been keeping all of you in my thoughts, and I shall continue to do so until we see each other next. Please be safe!

Love,

Hannah

HAPPY 17th BIRTHDAY, DAPHNE!!

Hope you got lots of presents! Mine probably won't get to you until tomorrow as I couldn't get to the market today, but I promise I'll make you something nice to make up for it!

Everything's pretty normal at home so far. Dad's been nervous about the state of the War; he knows he can't stop working, but he keeps talking about how much he'd like to get us out of the country. I know we don't have enough money to do it, though, and we'd know nothing about the Wizarding World in any other countries, so it'd be hard for Dennis and me to continue our schooling. And it's not like I could just jump back into Muggle schooling – there'd be no way I could catch up after spending five years at Hogwarts.

The Daily Prophet hasn't been helpful in putting any information out, but I read in the Muggle paper that there have been eleven mysterious kidnappings in the last two months. If those are the work of those rogue Guilders, that could explain Scrimgeour's interest in capturing them at all

costs.

On a lighter note, if we're talking about matchmaking, my brother Dennis once had a crush on this girl in grade school, but had no idea how to approach her about it. He was afraid of talking to her because he thought he'd babble like an idiot, so Dad suggested to Dennis that he give her flowers, and he did – by accident. When class was out at recess, Dennis made a whole bunch of daisies sprout up between him and the girl with magic. Freaked us all out at the time – fortunately Dennis got over her after a little while.

Here are some pictures of Dennis and me at the local playground; we were feeling down, so we decided to sneak out and go ride the swings for a while. It always cheers us up.

Cheers!

Colin

Astoria and Daphne,

Words cannot fully express how happy I was to receive your scrapbook. It's so beautifully made, and the thought of being able to talk freely with you all is a truly incalculable gift. Thank you, Daphne, and thank you to the friend who made you these.

Mama, Papa, and I have moved into a safe house, though Papa still maintains our old house and goes to work as usual, without telling anyone that Mama and I are living somewhere else. Mama doesn't like our new space very much; Papa tried to make it look and feel a lot like home, but Mama has hated the changes in our routine. She particularly laments not being able to go out to the used bookstore anymore, since she can't buy and collect any more new books. My new room also has no windows, which makes it quite a bit darker and gloomier than I'm used to. Still I've been able to light a lot of candles and levitate them over the bed like the ones back at Hogwarts, and that's helped brighten it up.

I'm afraid Papa rarely speaks about work to Mama or me, given that a lot of his job is top secret, but I confess, I was suspicious about the state of the Ministry even before reading Ron and Kevin's letters. If nothing else, Papa has been working longer hours than usual.

Oh, and Kevin, Bridget, Hannah, Colin, I frankly envy your parents' interest in your love lives; Mama and Papa have flat-out forbidden me to date any boys. Fortunately for me I've never wanted to date any boys anyway! Ha!

Regards,

Arjuna

Hi, Astoria! Hi, Daphne!

*I love, love, **LOVE** my scrapbook! Pink is my absolute favorite color! I hope you like it too, Daphne, as your present is also pink!*

Everything's okay here at home, though George has been kind of quiet lately. He got a promotion at work, but he hasn't wanted to talk about it, which hasn't made Mum very happy. I've been calling Dad on the phone pretty regularly, and he seems okay too, but one of his coworkers has gone missing. I don't know if it was one of the Guilders, or if the Death Eaters attacked her and no one's found out yet...either way, I hope she's okay.

Colin, I know that playground in your picture! It's right around where Dad used to live, when he first moved out of our house! I loved riding those swings!

Here are some kisses from Mr. Whiskers! Sorry it's a Muggle picture and not a magical one – Mr. Whiskers much prefers Muggle cameras, as they don't puff smoke. I got him to kiss the camera by putting some chocolate pudding on the lens: it's his favorite!

xoxoxo

Rose

Dear Daphne and Astoria,

This scrapbook is so lovely! Thank you so much for the wonderful gift – now I'll be able to just tape your birthday present here, Daphne, rather than send it! I had to paint this from memory, as I didn't have a photograph of you with me, but I hope you like it; I'm really glad I had you holding our white kitchen scrapbook, now that you've sent around these pretty new ones!

New York City is truly an amazing place! It's been so fun to explore everything. I've only been able to sightsee on my days off, as work has kept me busy, but at least I was able to go to the Empire State Building! Here are some of the pictures I took...

The Department of Magical Games and Sports is very different at the MACUSA than it is back home. I toured the one at our Ministry of Magic before I left, and everything was pretty straightforward, even if the offices were a bit cluttered. The Department here though is so specialized! Quodpot is the most popular game around here, but there are many regional varieties depending on where you live in the States. For instance, Texan Quodpot is done with five players instead of eleven, and New England Quodpot has a rulebook long enough to rival An Encyclopedia of Toadstools. And that's not even touching America's other games and sports, like Enchanted Fencing, Snidgetball, Quidditch (of course), Winged Horse Racing, Air Polo, Wizard Bowling,

Gnome Putting, and Hawkstones (which is their version of Gobstones). We also have to work with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement whenever we're dealing with recreational Wizard Dueling ranges. I've had to deal with a lot of paperwork regarding what spells can be used on the ranges, and it's an absolute nightmare!

Fortunately even though work is insane, I've been able to settle in well enough. Our landlord Roxanna is very nice, even though her son Juan is a bit shy. He's been writing a novel for the last year, so he barely comes out of their unit. Roxanna told me she's had a wide assortment of tenants moving in and out over the last few years due to the expense of living here. A new tenant from South Carolina is supposed to move into the unit next door to us in the next few days – apparently she wants to be an actress on Broadway.

Marietta hasn't been able to say much about the Ministry except that she's been kept busy at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I suspect her briefness might be because the mail is being watched, though. I hope everything's okay...

I'll try to post more pictures of the city next Tuesday to show you all! I want to explore Times Square, if I can.

Love,

Cho

Daphne,

Asked our family house-elf Lowry to help me do some snooping. I'm copying this from a letter she found in my parents' office that might be relevant to your question.

To Whom It May Concern,

The question would appear to be whether or not that aforementioned loophole in the Statute of Secrecy would allow the profiling of individuals who pose a direct or suspected threat to the Wizarding World's safety. Might I have your professional opinion on the matter, just in a hypothetical scenario?

Signed,

Pius Thicknesse

Head Wizard

Department of Magical Law Enforcement

Ministry of Magic

Seems the Minister's right-hand man needs some legal advice...

MB

Hi, Daphne and Astoria,

It's great to hear from you! I just sent my gift your way; it's a little small, but I hope you like it, Daphne.

What Millicent found matches up with what I've learned. Mum told me at dinner that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has just expanded their offices and that she'll be assigned to head a new task force that's supposed to look into threats to Ministry security. It's called MASTIF, or Magical Agents for Securing Threats and Investigating Felonies – Mum's been referring to its members as Mastiffs, like the dogs. Anyway, Mum says Scrimgeour and Thicknesse have told the Mastiffs to add more details to every witch and wizard file on record: not just address, wand type, and employment history, but also blood status, political affiliation, and known Muggle and Magical associates. Mum really doesn't like it; not only has Thicknesse been acting off for the last week or so, but she doesn't like the thought of invading other people's privacy that much, no matter what they're accused of. I told her she shouldn't do it if she doesn't like it, but I don't think I convinced her. She said she needs to look after her family first, and she can't do that if she gets fired. I wanted to argue, but Mum's been worried enough about Grandma Trudy getting sick, and I didn't want to add to her worries...

I'm so jealous of you right now, Cho! The view from the Empire State Building looks amazing. If you get the chance, could you please take a picture of the Statue of Liberty while you're there? It'd be so cool to really see it in person!

I'm really glad I've got Pogo to play with right now. I wish I could copy him ten times and send those copies to the rest of you, so he could cheer you all up too. At least I can put in a picture: see how high he can jump?

Owen

By the next morning, Daphne had received her friends' other gifts – silver hoop earrings from Kevin, a layered vanilla bean and lemon cake from Hannah, a small book of poetry from Arjuna, mint green macaroons decorated with fondant leaves from Bridget, a colorfully printed head scarf from Owen, a pink friendship bracelet from Rose, a black swan hair comb from Millicent, and an assortment of chocolate and peanut butter fudge from Ron and Mrs. Weasley. She hadn't been able to keep all of the gifts out of the sight of her parents – Mr. Greengrass intercepted her gift from Millicent, and Hannah's owl had to drop the cake off in the dining hall, but fortunately the others were discreet enough that they got in safe and sound. Astoria had even been able to sneak in the Weasleys' slightly larger gift by hiding it and Errol away in her room rather than Daphne's, while Daphne distracted their parents.

It was as Daphne finished writing a reply to her friend's letters while sitting on her bed that another knock came from her bedroom door. Closing her scrapbook and tucking it under her pillow, she called,

“Come in.”

The door opened, and Mrs. Greengrass entered the room, a box in her hands.

“Another gift for you,” she said dryly, “from a Mr. Colin Creevey.”

Daphne felt as though she'd been dunked in cold water.

“Oh – yes.”

She quickly got up and took the package from her mother. She ripped open the paper, and the smell of delicious chocolate rippled out before she'd even finished unwrapping the tin. When she opened it, she found an assortment of chocolates, all hand-decorated with white icing hearts and squiggles.

Mrs. Greengrass's light blue eyes narrowed suspiciously on Colin's gift.

“I don't know the name Creevey,” she said quietly.

Daphne kept her gaze squarely on the chocolates.

“He's not a Pureblood,” she said as levelly as she could.

“Has he *any* magical blood?” Mrs. Greengrass asked, her tone sharpening slightly.

Daphne didn't reply.

“Daphne, you *know* the danger in that,” Mrs. Greengrass murmured critically. “If he were put on the list of your known associates – ”

“No adult knows of that association but you, Mother,” Daphne answered solemnly. “Will *you* say anything?”

Mrs. Greengrass stiffened. She turned away, but she couldn't seem to leave the doorframe.

“...Those chocolates were made by hand,” she said slowly. Her words were a guess, with the slightest hint of questioning in her tone.

Daphne nodded. She could tell that from how rough the edges of the chocolates were – if a professional had made them, each piece would've been much smoother.

“Awfully generous,” Mrs. Greengrass said softly.

Daphne looked up at her mother, fixing her with a refined, neutral eye.

“From what I understand, Mother...friendship and generosity are apparently related.”

Mrs. Greengrass looked over her shoulder at Daphne, considering her for a long moment. In her light blue eyes so like Astoria's, there was something confused, almost awed. Then the strange gleam faded, and she turned and walked silently away up the hall.

The Ministry Falls

On the morning of August 1st, Cynthia Cauldwell went to work through the Floo Network as per usual. Brushing the soot off her light blue dress robes and black tights, she strode quickly up the entrance hall alongside the dozens of other Ministry employees, the heels of her shoes quietly clapping the floor as she went.

When she reached her office on Level Two, Cynthia found a large pile of paperwork already sitting in her inbox and several light green paper airplanes flying around the room. With a faint sigh, she closed the door and walked over to her chair, flicking her wand at the airplanes so that they floated out of the air and landed gently on the desk in front of her. Then, one by one, she went through each letter. Most of them were departmental memos, though the last one was an update from St. Mungo's – her mother Gertrude Bonham (otherwise known as Trudy) was feeling much better and would likely be well enough to leave the Ward later that day. The note left Cynthia feeling a little more relaxed; while Trudy was sick in the ward, Cynthia had had to leave Owen at home on his own, so she was glad that Trudy would be able to look after him again. She knew Owen would be very happy to have his grandmother back at home too, as it meant he could leave the house during the day instead of being a locked-up latchkey kid.

Cynthia was just finishing up adding some new information sent down from the Auror Office to the files left on her desk when there was a knock on her door.

"Come in," Cynthia said without looking up.

The door opened, before being abruptly closed again with a quick *snap*. Cynthia looked up, and to her surprise, Millicent Bagnold was standing in the doorway of her office.

"Minister!" said Cynthia, bolting to her feet immediately.

Bagnold was dressed to the nines in orange and canary yellow, her dark hair in wild curls that contrasted sharply with Cynthia's magically straightened locks. Her eyes appeared very stormy as they darted back to the door and then up at Cynthia.

"Cynthia," Bagnold said very quietly and very seriously, "I need your help."

Cynthia blinked, startled. She'd known the once-Minister for a very long time; her father Martin had worked alongside Bagnold at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement back in the day,

and Cynthia would often see Bagnold whenever Martin would bring her into the office when she was a little girl. So hearing something like this from Bagnold was the very last thing she expected.

“My help – ?”

Bagnold strode forward and slammed a hand down on the open file on Cynthia’s desk.

“*The Ministry has been compromised,*” she whispered urgently, her eyes narrowed and flaring with strength despite their terror. “It’s Pius – he’s been Imperiused by the Death Eaters – I had come to visit him on his request and witnessed one of his staffers using the Imperius Curse on Savage – ”

“The new Head of the Auror Department?” said Cynthia, her voice quite a bit shakier than Bagnold’s in her shock.

“Yes,” said Bagnold. “That staffer has to have been impersonated by a Death Eater; if so, then that means the Death Eaters now have control over two of Rufus’s most powerful subordinates, maybe more...and if they either successfully control or kill Rufus, then the Ministry will not survive. Cynthia, you’re in charge of the files of *every* witch and wizard in Great Britain – where they live, what their ancestry is – even which Muggle-born children will be going to Hogwarts next year. We must destroy those files, *every last one of them*, before the Death Eaters find their way in...!”

There was an abrupt, muffled explosion from the floor overhead. Bagnold looked up toward the ceiling, her back stiffening like a frightened cat’s and her eyes going very wide.

“It’s begun,” she whispered.

Cynthia looked from the ceiling to Bagnold, panic starting to set in.

“M-Minister – ”

Bagnold clutched the younger woman’s arm tightly.

“It’s up to you: *destroy those files*. It’s the only way to save our World from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.”

With a sweep of her robes, she ran out of the office, leaving the door ajar behind her.

Cynthia stared after her, barely seeing the many Mastiffs sitting at the desks on the other side of her office door, as they watched Bagnold leave and then looked up at Cynthia for some sort of explanation.

Cynthia at first was frozen to the spot, unable to fathom what she'd just heard. Then, her hand shaking, she took out her wand, opened her desk, and took out a Howler. She had to send a message, and she had no time to write it.

Owen had been playing with Pogo in the yard outside their house in Salazar's Grove, when a tiny owl landed in an oak tree close by. Owen looked up in time to see the owl drop a distinctive red envelope.

He caught the note in mid-air and stared at it, baffled.

'A Howler from Mum – what did I do?' he wondered. *'I mean, I guess my room's a bit dirty, but...'*

Deciding quickly this couldn't be what it was about, Owen looked down at Pogo.

"Come on, boy," he said stridently, "let's get inside and open this up – no sense in scaring the neighbors..."

Dropping the tennis ball in his mouth, Pogo followed his owner into the house. Owen closed and locked the back door behind them. Once the house was secure, he peeled open the red envelope and prepared for the hailstorm that was sure to erupt from it.

To his surprise, however, his mother's words sounded much more frightened than angry. They came out in a hushed voice magically transformed into a garbled shout, as if they were part of a damaged audio file that was magnified to ten times its normal volume.

"OWEN, STAY IN THE HOUSE. PROFESSOR RAMSAY WILL BE COMING TO GET YOU

*AFTER HE PICKS UP YOUR GRANDMOTHER. DO NOT OPEN THE DOOR TO THE HOUSE FOR ANYONE ELSE, EVEN IF THEY SAY THEY'RE FROM THE MINISTRY. DON'T TRUST ANYONE BUT RAMSAY, NOT EVEN ME. **DON'T LEAVE THE HOUSE UNTIL HE ARRIVES.** EVERYTHING WILL BE ALL RIGHT. I LOVE YOU."*

Pogo whined in response to the artificially magnified sound, his entire body crumpling up anxiously. Owen stared as the red note ripped itself up into tiny pieces and dissolved away into flaming cinders.

"Don't open the door to anyone, even if they're from the Ministry?" What could that mean? Was something wrong at the Ministry? Why would Ramsay be coming to get him? Was it no longer safe at home? And why...why would his mother say not to trust her? The only thing that could make Owen not trust her is if she was suddenly not in control of herself, like if she'd been turned into an Inferi, or if she –

The Imperius Curse. The Death Eaters used it to take control of innocent people and make them do their bidding. But why would she have to worry about that unless – ?

Owen's fear rippled through every fiber of his body.

His mother was in danger, and she knew it. Why else would she shield him – why else would she try to reassure him that everything would be all right? Didn't she and his father do the same thing...right before his father died in the hospital...?

If he didn't do something, then he would never see his mother again. She would be gone forever, with her last words to him holding the same sentiment as his father's – that *everything would be all right*...!

His eyes flooding with tears of pain and righteous fury, Owen scrambled up the stairs to his bedroom. He flung open the door, snatching up a pot of Floo Powder in one hand and the burgundy scrapbook Daphne had sent him in the other, and charged back downstairs. He dashed into his mother's office, dipped a quill in some ink, and wrote a quick, messily scrawled message into the scrapbook:

There are Death Eaters inside the Ministry. I don't know how, but my mum just sent me a message and I'm going to go help her. If they get their hands on the new MASTIF files, then they'll be able to find any witch or wizard they want! All of you, get somewhere safe! I'll write again as soon as I can!

Owen

Barely giving the ink enough time to dry, Owen closed the scrapbook so no one else would be able to read it, dashed into his mother's office fireplace, threw a fistful of Floo Powder down toward his feet, and cried "MINISTRY OF MAGIC!" at the top of his lungs.

With a flash of green, the boy disappeared, leaving poor Pogo gasping anxiously after him.

The Department of Magical Law Enforcement was in chaos. After Cynthia had sent her vocal messages to Owen and Ramsay, she tried to urge her subordinates into action, but before she could summon any words, three Aurors charged into the room.

"Cynthia Cauldwell, you are under arrest," declared brown-haired, long-lashed Hattie Ollerton-Whitby, who led the group.

Cynthia faltered, shocked. "Under arrest...for *what*?"

"For aiding and abetting Millicent Bagnold, a fugitive charged with treason," an Auror with a dirty blond buzz-cut said fiercely. "Now surrender your wand, or we'll be forced to Stun!"

"N-no!" Cynthia stammered, her voice shaking with terror. "Wait, please – you don't understand –"

"Surrender your wand and stand down, or we'll be forced to Stun!" barked the Auror with the buzz-cut again.

"*Wait!* L-let me explain –"

"You may explain in the custody of your *superior*," the male Auror said flatly, almost coldly. "Pius Thicknesse will be delighted to listen to your *story* –"

It was then that Cynthia realized: *he was under the Imperius Curse too.*

Realizing that she would soon be overtaken, she raised her wand and pointed it right at the Auror with the buzzcut.

BANG!

With a blast of magic, the Auror was catapulted off his feet, his wand flying out of his hand as he was slammed up against the wall. The other two Aurors opened fire, and Cynthia started rapidly deflecting spells, rushing out of her office and down the hallway as fast as she could. She had to reach the MASTIF archives – !

In the Atrium, everything looked normal, but Owen knew it wasn't. He darted through the crowd, narrowly dodging security by hiding in a crowd of navy-blue-dressed Unspeakables, and ducked into the lift. Pressing the button marked for Level Two, he waited impatiently for the other employees to get off before he was left alone and could get off at the right level.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, Owen found a floor in disarray. Several desks had been overturned, and the employees therein looked shaken, as if a bomb had just gone off.

Owen immediately dashed over to a very young employee with curly orange-blond hair on the floor.

“What’s going on?” he demanded.

She looked up, and Owen noted the odd pimples speckled across her nose. His eyes widened slightly.

“You’re Cho’s friend,” he realized. “Marietta!”

Marietta was startled at being recognized. Then, after a moment, she realized whom she was speaking to.

“...*Owen*,” she said in a hushed voice.

“Marietta, where’s my mum?” Owen asked urgently.

Marietta’s face had gone very pale; her dark eyes darted down the hall on the other side of the desks and then back to Owen.

“Your mother – the Aurors – they’re trying to arrest her – ”

“*What?*” said Owen, horrified.

“They say she and Bagnold...are charged with *treason*,” Marietta explained weakly, looking very shaken. “I hadn’t believed it, but – when they told her to stand down, your mother disarmed Paul Colton and started running – ”

Owen heard her, but it felt like her words were echoing down a long corridor in his brain. His mind racing so fast he couldn’t have thought rationally if he’d wanted to, he barreled down the hallway, even as Marietta tried to call after him,

“Owen, come back!”

In the Minister of Magic’s office, Bagnold and Scrimgeour soon found themselves locked in a duel by the Imperiused Pius Thicknesse and Savage. They were able to hold their own pretty well at the start, given that both of them were excellent duelists, until Thicknesse’s bespeckled staffer entered the office.

Bagnold and Scrimgeour both turned on the young man, raising their wands and casting silent Stunning spells –

BAM.

With a single flick of his wand, the young, bespeckled man rebounded both Stunning spells into the wall, blasting open the cement, and threw both Bagnold and Scrimgeour off their feet and across the room. Despite colliding with Scrimgeour's desk, they somehow managed to keep a hold of their wands, and Scrimgeour somersaulted over the desk to land on his feet on the other side, blasting more vicious red and black spells at the staffer. Alas, Scrimgeour was clearly outmatched; the staffer's Shield spells were done so effortlessly it was as though he was casting them in his sleep.

"Quite an *impressive* show of force," said the staffer coolly. "But not enough, I'm afraid...*far* from enough..."

Bagnold regained her posture enough to raise her wand again, summoning a flurry of white she blasted into the staffer's back. At once he was encased in solid ice, and for a short moment, it looked like he'd been restrained. Then, in a matter of seconds, the ice shattered into a thousand sharp, glass-like pieces, which the staffer sent flying back at Bagnold all at once.

"*Ulk!*"

The ice buried itself into her flesh like knives. Blood spurted out of every wound the ice shards inflicted to her arms, chest, neck, and face, staining the orange and yellow fabric of her robes. Then, as if in slow motion, the once-Minister of Magic fell, her body collapsing to the ground almost as gracefully and quietly as a leaf shed from a tree in the fall.

Scrimgeour looked down in horror at his predecessor lying dead on the ground as the staffer gave an oddly high-pitched laugh.

"So your '*fight*' ends, Millicent Bagnold," he said with the coldest and smuggest satisfaction, his eyes flashing a cruel scarlet.

Scrimgeour stared, thunderstruck, as the bespeckled man's frame started to morph and melt, becoming paler and taller and skinnier, with slit-like nostrils and vicious blood-colored eyes. With a callous hand, he shed the glasses from his face, tossing them to the ground and crushing them under his foot.

"And soon too shall yours," said Lord Voldemort.

Owen reached the hall contained the MASTIF records within a minute and found his mother already there, setting the shelves ablaze with her wand one by one.

“*Mum!*”

Cynthia looked up, and her face filled with horror at the sight of her son rushing towards her.

“*Owen* – Owen, what are you *doing* here?!”

“Did you *really* think I’d just stand back and do nothing?” Owen challenged her.

Several Stunning spells missed them by inches. Cynthia ducked behind a flaming bookcase, pulling Owen after her; then she whirled on her son, her dark eyes welling up with angry, terrified tears.

“Owen Duane Cauldwell, you are going back home *this instant* – ”

“No *way* am I leaving you here!” Owen shot back fiercely, his eyes filling up with tears too. “I already lost Dad – I’m *not* losing you too!”

The bookcase behind them was blasted over, and both Owen and Cynthia had to dodge the flaming wood as it fell to the ground.

To his credit, Scrimgeour did not falter at the sight of the most powerful Dark Wizard in the world. His very first instinct was to lash out with his wand, shooting emerald green flares at his opponent. Voldemort dodged each Killing Curse with ease.

“A shame to lose a determined fighter with such a good pedigree,” the Dark Lord sneered.

He brought his wand around in a tight circle, and in an instant, Scrimgeour’s wrist was forcibly twisted around so harshly and fully that the bones broke with a horrible *CRACK*. Scrimgeour gave a loud cry of pain as his wand was wrenched out of his grip and Voldemort slammed him against

the wall, his claw-like white hand clutching his throat.

“You could still be of some use to me, Scrimgeour,” Voldemort whispered coolly, “if you’ll tell me the location of Harry Potter.”

Wincing in pain, Scrimgeour looked up, and his golden brown eyes flared with nothing short of hatred.

“Like...Hell,” he choked.

And he raised his head and spat in Lord Voldemort’s face.

Barely three seconds later, the office was full of green light, and Scrimgeour collapsed to the floor at the Dark Lord’s feet with a *THUD*.

Wiping the spit from his face, Voldemort regarded Scrimgeour’s prone form with contempt.

“Ignorant fool,” he murmured.

He kicked the Minister’s corpse callously out of his way and settled down in the tall chair behind the desk. The mind-controlled Thicknesse would be here shortly, to take on his new position as Minister of Magic. Then, once all the loose ends were tied up, the extermination of the Mudbloods and filth of the Wizarding World could *really* get underway...

The Aurors were coming in larger numbers to the MASTIF archive, trying to contain the out-of-control flames. As Hattie Ollerton-Whitby followed the remainder of her unit, she raised her wand, shooting off several emerald green blasts at the ceiling overhead.

All of a sudden, as the fire started to engulf the shelves more and more, Hattie noticed another figure alongside Cynthia’s, helping her set the files ablaze with a carefully controlled *Incendio* charm – a *smaller* figure, like a boy – one no older than her son –

"*Attack,*" a voice echoed in her head in a sweet-sounding order.

Something deep inside of Hattie, deep in the back of her brain, seemed to awaken.

'*No,*' she told the strange voice in her mind. '*I can't.*'

"*I said attack.*"

'*I can't!*'

"*ATTACK! ATTACK NOW!*"

'*NO!*'

Something in Hattie's mind cracked wide open, blasting away the vague, demented fog that had clung to her sight.

She wavered on her feet, her head falling forward as she struggled to regain her balance. Her vision rippled blearily as she blinked several times, taking in her surroundings.

There was a confrontation going on - why were they attacking? She suddenly didn't remember...

Hattie looked around, her eyes very wide. Something was wrong: the Aurors alongside her were shooting spells at random like rookies. Even Dawlish, who fought next to her, seemed oddly trigger-happy, when he almost *never* desired direct confrontation...

She looked up at the people they were attacking, taking in the sight of Cynthia and Owen setting fire to the archives around them. Three more spells just barely missed their heads, colliding with the tops of the shelves and thrusting flaming cinders down around them.

"Cease fire!" Hattie cried, her heart flaring with terror.

But her compatriots didn't seem to hear her. Dawlish even started shooting emerald green sparks, which just barely missed Cynthia and collided with a bookcase on the far end.

“*Cease fire!*” Hattie shouted again. “There’s a *child!*”

Dawlish didn't seem to hear her; Hattie rushed over, trying to grab his arm, but she didn't reach him in time. Another green flare left his wand, growing into a bomb-like blast –

Owen, seeing the emerald light racing toward his mother, ran forward and tried to push her out of the way. Unfortunately he wasn't quite fast enough, and the spell ended up colliding with their sides.

For an instant, Owen and Cynthia were both frozen in mid-air. Then, as if in tandem, they fell, Owen's body landing limply on top of his mother's, with his small arms flopping down around her in an ineffective, feeble attempt at protection.

Owen and Cynthia Cauldwell were dead, killed by the exact same Killing Curse.

Hattie's face was white as a sheet as she whirled on Dawlish. But where she expected to see regret or horror, she only saw a cold, empty stare.

And it was then that she realized what Cynthia had figured out only five minutes before: Dawlish wasn't there. *None* of her compatriots were there. Their bodies were there, but their minds were not even close.

Dawlish turned to Hattie, his wand still beside his face. Hattie looked upon the Senior Auror, her dark, long-lashed eyes very wide and scared upon his oddly unemotional face. Then her eyes narrowed sharply, and she raised her wand.

WHAM!

Dawlish and the other five Aurors in the vicinity were instantly thrown off their feet, their wands flying out of their hands. Hattie darted into the lift and, before anyone could stop her, it carried her upstairs.

“After her!” cried Dawlish, stumbling around to reclaim his wand.

He and the other Aurors dashed up the staircase at the far end, but by the time they reached the Atrium, Hattie Ollerton-Whitby had already vanished.

Escape from the New Regime

Kevin dashed across his bedroom, packing his best pair of trainers and his teal-colored Kransimir scrapbook into the trunk set up on his bed and closing it.

When he'd received Owen's message, he had immediately called his father at work, telling him there was a family emergency and he had to get home right away. When he'd tried using the Floo Network to call his mother, her office was abandoned. Kevin tried to think optimistically – that maybe she'd walked out for a moment and he'd just missed her – but it was proving difficult...

"Kevin?" a voice rang out as the front door closed sharply behind him.

"Dad!" Kevin called over his shoulder.

As luck would have it, there was a *whoosh* and *clatter* that signified that someone had just popped out of their fireplace by Floo powder. A moment later there was a loud *crash*.

Both Kevin and Elijah Whitby barreled into the living room, to find Hattie Ollerton-Whitby standing, wand drawn, in front of the now broken fireplace. She whirled on her son and husband, her face as white as a sheet and her eyes half-mad with terror.

"...The Ministry has fallen," she whispered weakly.

"*What?*" Elijah said, shocked and horrified.

He immediately rushed to comfort his wife, who was shaking from head to toe.

"Jack Savage entered our offices, telling us we had to arrest Millicent Bagnold and the new Head of the MASTIF office. After that...I don't know, he must have used the Imperius Curse, because the next thing I knew, we were in the middle of a confrontation in the MASTIF archives, trying to capture Cynthia Cauldwell –"

"Owen!"

His parents turned on Kevin in surprise. Their son looked very pale.

“Owen sent me a message,” he said quickly, his heart throbbing with terror. “He said his mother was in trouble – was he there, Mum? Did you see him?”

Hattie stared at Kevin for a moment, her face very pale. Then her eyes filled up with tears.

“...I’m so sorry, Kevin,” she said very softly. “When I came to, Owen was helping Cynthia torch the archive’s records...I don’t know why, perhaps they suspected there were intruders at the Ministry, and thought to protect the owners of those files. I tried to halt the attack, but – but – ”

Hattie’s tears streamed down her face as she turned away, struggling to regain her composure. Kevin took a shaky step back, his long-lashed brown eyes widening to the size of dinner plates, as Elijah brought his arms around his wife from behind and squeezed her close to his chest.

“There was nothing you could’ve done,” he told her softly.

Hattie turned back to her husband and son, her eyes blazing despite the tears still flooding down her face.

“Maybe,” she said, her voice quaking with both fear and resolve, “but I *will* do something now. Pack up your things – we’ll need to be quick to leave before the Ministry catches up with us.”

When Bridget received Owen’s message, she tried and failed to urge her mother to run. Charlotte Jaheem’s business made it a much more daunting task to just drop everything and go – not only would she be leaving her employees in the dust, but their entire future and livelihood as well. So Bridget was forced to stick it out, however strong the inclination to hide was.

After about five minutes, Charlotte’s lunch service was interrupted when a young woman entered the restaurant and, rather than asking for a table, asked to speak to the Jaheem family in private. The server in question led her upstairs to Charlotte’s office, and a few minutes later Bridget finished up the dishes she’d been cleaning in the kitchens and headed upstairs too.

The woman sitting across from her mother was a rather flashy sort, from her neat black bob to her Union Jack tank top to her dark red pleather pants. Bridget thought she rather looked like she'd just popped out of a Spice Girls music video. Her face was very solemn and stoic as if she were a model on a magazine cover, rather than anything living and breathing.

As soon as Bridget came into the room, the flashy woman immediately got up, her blue-shadowed eyes widening only slightly.

"Oh good, you're here, Bridget," she said quickly. "Close the door, please."

Bridget did so, though she appeared no less suspicious as she looked from the woman to her mother and back.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Evelyn," the woman replied. "Gordon Ramsay sent me."

"Professor Ramsay?" Bridget said, startled.

"Yes – he went to Salazar's Grove on Mrs. Cauldwell's request to pick up her son, but it seems he's gone missing. Chef Ramsay then heard another rumor that Scrimgeour has been assassinated, and that Millicent Bagnold is suspected of the crime."

Bridget's eyes narrowed sharply. "She didn't do it."

"Of course not," Evelyn said darkly. "We all knew that at once. But for a lie that big to be circulated, it has to mean that something's very wrong at the Ministry. Either Millicent Bagnold was taken over by the Imperius Curse, or she was framed...and as she's dead too, there's no way we'll ever know for sure. Either way, the Ministry has been compromised, meaning the Death Eaters have somehow found a way in."

Bridget and Charlotte exchanged anxious looks.

“But – ” said Charlotte, “ – what does that have to do with us?”

Evelyn turned to Charlotte grimly.

“The Ministry recently opened a new department, meant to create more detailed files about every witch and wizard in Great Britain, so as to track down threats – ”

“MASTIF,” interjected Bridget.

“Yes,” Evelyn granted. “That department has done extensive work this last month...and I’m afraid to say that your daughter has a file there too, Ms. Jaheem. If the Death Eaters get a hold of it, they could surround this street in seconds.”

Charlotte looked horrified. Bridget immediately shot to her feet.

“Then we have to go now,” she said. Her mother opened her mouth to argue, but Bridget cut her off quickly, “Mum, we need to shut the restaurant down and send everyone home. If we don’t, they’ll all be sitting ducks when the Death Eaters get here.”

Charlotte looked from her daughter to Evelyn and back. Then, her eyes boring into Bridget’s matching black, she inclined her head in a solemn nod.

“Go to your room and pack,” said Charlotte. “I’ll go downstairs and start closing procedures.”

“Good – I already have a Portkey ready for us,” said Evelyn. “It’ll activate in thirty minutes.”

Bridget left the office and dashed back to her room. Before she even moved to pack her trunk, however, she opened her forest green Kransimir scrapbook and wrote an entry.

Upon receiving Owen’s message, Rose had immediately gone to her mother Catherine and told her

to contact George at the Ministry right away. Once she'd been badgered enough, Catherine finally wrote George a letter and sent it with the family owl, Pinfeathers.

"Mum, we *really* should try the Floo," Rose said tersely. "George said that if you stick your head in it, you can contact people –"

"George told us to always use owls," Catherine cut her off tensely.

"But Mum, Owen says there are *Death Eaters* there!" Rose shot back, frustration creeping into her voice.

"All the more reason not to use the Floo Network," Catherine told her firmly. "Our voices could draw attention to the fireplace – to George's office. We can't risk it."

Rose opened her mouth to argue, but Catherine brought a hand up to trail through her daughter's brown hair.

"George works right next door to the Auror Department," she said reassuringly, "and there are *dozens* of Aurors. They'll be more than enough to protect the Ministry."

However reassuring her mother's words were, it didn't make Rose any less anxious as the minutes dragged by. Feeling too on edge to sit still, Rose dashed back upstairs to her room and messily stuffed two dresses, a spare pair of shoes, her toothbrush and toothpaste, her copy of *The Last Unicorn*, and her gel pen collection into her neon yellow backpack. Mr. Whiskers, who seemed to know something was going on, tried to dart under the bed, but Rose quickly picked up the kitten with both hands.

"It's okay, Whiskers," she told him, putting him on her shoulder as if he were an owl perching there.

The white kitten dug his claws into Rose's shoulder, the nails puncturing the fabric and pricking her skin, but she merely scratched his neck reassuringly and let him cling on as she grabbed her favorite pink hooded jacket and put it on so that Mr. Whiskers was a small lump on her shoulder with his tiny head popping out next to hers. She then zipped up the jacket, smiling down at her kitten safely secured to her shoulder.

“There – that should feel cozy...”

The last thing Rose made to pack was the pink Kransimir scrapbook Daphne had sent her. Cracking it open one more time, the little Hufflepuff noticed a new cluster of words had appeared on the page below Owen’s message, scribbled in familiarly sharp, brisk handwriting.

Guys –

A friend of Ramsay’s has come to pick up my mum and me and get us somewhere safe. She says that Scrimgeour is dead and Bagnold has been accused of murdering him, but of course that can’t be true, so the Death Eaters must have done something. She also said that Ramsay was supposed to go pick up Owen, but he must not have gotten there before Owen left...

I’ll write more later!

Bridget

Rose’s eyes trailed across the page, widening with each word. As she came to the end of the note, however, she was startled by a very loud *CRACK*.

‘*That sounds like someone Apparating,*’ Rose realized after a moment, as an assortment of car alarms went off.

Darting over to her window, she looked outside. A wizard in billowing scarlet robes had appeared in the center of the street, his wand drawn without care. A second later, a witch in black appeared alongside him, and the two started marching up to their house.

Rose’s heart leapt into her throat. For a split second, she’d thought it might be another friend of Ramsay’s, but no normal witch or wizard would *dare* use magic so openly; George had said the Statute of Secrecy was the most important law in the Wizarding World, and there could be no secrecy if someone just waved his wand willy-nilly and dressed so blatantly –

Snatching up her backpack and throwing it onto the shoulder not holding Mr. Whiskers, Rose barreled down the stairs. When she reached the landing, she found Catherine coming out of her room, looking terrified by the commotion.

“Mum – !” Rose started.

Catherine, her eyes widening in fear, quickly closed the curtains over the large kitchen window and ran over to her daughter. A loud knock rang out from the front door to the right of the kitchen, making her jump.

Quickly noting the backpack and cat on her daughter’s shoulders, Catherine made her mind very quickly. With a faint aggressiveness to her posture, she walked Rose out of the kitchen, past the front door and into the living room on the other side.

“Rose, we need to get somewhere safe, until we can contact George,” she said urgently. “Do you know a place?”

Rose thought very quickly. Then Bridget’s written words came back to her.

“...Hell’s Kitchen!” she said, her lips unraveling in a relieved grin as she looked up at her mother. “We can go to Hell’s Kitchen! Professor Ramsay will help us!”

Catherine’s lips spread into a smile too. “Then that’s where we’ll go – ”

Another knock came from the door, louder and harsher this time, and Catherine flinched. Trying to stay calm, she quickly scooped out a pile of Floo Powder from the white serving dish on the mantle and handed it to her daughter.

“Go, quickly! I’ll be right behind you!”

She shoved Rose into the living room fireplace. Rose secured her free hand on top of Mr. Whiskers on her shoulder and, swallowing her terror, she obediently threw the Floo Powder at her feet, throwing ash and fiery green dust into the air.

“Hell’s Kitchen, Wandsworth Green!” she cried very loudly and clearly, just as George has taught her.

Green flames enveloped her vision and she was catapulted away into the abyss.

Five seconds later the front door was blasted open, and the strange witch and wizard entered the room, just in time to see Catherine reaching out as if to grab her own fistful of Floo Powder. She froze, her hand just over the serving dish, and stared back at the witch and wizard whose wands were pointed directly at her.

“Where is Rose Zeller?” the witch demanded, her voice unusually hard.

Catherine’s lip trembled. Very slowly she withdrew her hand from the fireplace, turning to face the terrifying figures.

“...She’s not here,” she said, her voice amazingly strong despite her shaking frame.

Colin, when he read Bridget and Owen’s messages, had immediately dashed over to his and Dennis’s shared bedroom to find his younger brother.

“Dennis! The Ministry – ”

Colin held up his red Kransimir scrapbook so Dennis could read the notes. Dennis’s eyes grew very wide; then he looked up at Colin.

“Dad!” said Dennis in concern. “He’s still on his route!”

“We’ve got to go get him,” Colin said firmly, preparing to run for the front door.

“Colin, wait!”

Dennis grabbed his arm.

“We can’t just leave the house without our stuff,” the younger Creevey reminded him. “What if we don’t have a chance to come back home? We’d be leaving behind food, clothes, money – ”

“ – Dad’s prescriptions,” said Colin, nodding in agreement, “you’re right. We’ll need to pack up – then we can call a cab, take it to the warehouse, and pick up Dad – ”

The two boys stumbled upstairs to the crawlspace above the Creevey family’s tiny flat, looking for their trunks. They had no idea how much time they had – all they could do was pray they could pack up everything they needed and reach their father before the Death Eaters found them...

Bridget was just stuffing her beat-up pair of white trainers into her trunk when Charlotte came darting back up the stairs.

“Bridget!” she said. “Bridget, we’ve got to go, right now!”

She grabbed her daughter’s hand with one hand and her trunk with the other and yanked them both downstairs.

“Mum – !” said Bridget, taken aback by her level of urgency. She glanced back over her shoulder at her room – she hadn’t finished packing –

“They’re *outside*, Bridget,” Charlotte whispered, her voice rippling with anxiety. “Two wizards – Evelyn recognized one of them as a Death Eater, even if he’s wearing a Ministry crest on his robes – ”

There was a loud knock on the front window. Trying to stay low, Charlotte and Bridget darted into the kitchens at the back of the restaurant. Just on the other side of the swinging doors was Evelyn, who was holding a set of black plastic measuring spoons in both hands.

“We still have two minutes until the Portkey activates,” she murmured. Her face remained stoic, but there was the faintest hint of concern starting to form in the cracks of her eyelids. “And I can’t Apparate us out of here. Is there any other way out of this place besides the front door?”

“The emergency exit,” said Charlotte, “but that’s on the side of the dining room...”

There was a second, more violent knock at the door.

“Open up!” roared a rather impatient-sounding voice. “We know you’re in there!”

Bridget turned to her mother urgently. “Mum, we’ll have to risk it – if we don’t go before the Death Eaters force their way in, we’ll be trapped here in the kitchen. Go with Evelyn and meet me outside – I need to get back upstairs!”

“Bridget, *no!*” cried Charlotte, but it was too late. Bridget had already broken away and dashed back out into the dining room, trying to stay low under the tables as she hurried across the room and back up the stairs.

Bridget climbed the stairs two by two, reaching the top landing and whirling on the spot to return to her room. She found the last thing she needed – her forest green scrapbook – and snatched it off of her bed before barreling back downstairs as fast as she could.

It was as she reached the bottom of the staircase that the wizards at the front door blasted open the front door.

BAM!

The huge chunk of the front wall was shattered and the pieces went flying; Bridget had to duck and cover to avoid the debris hurtling through the air. Rolling over on the ground, Bridget stumbled back to her feet, trying and failing to stay low under the tables that had been knocked over in the blast.

“*There!* The Mudblood!” cried one of the wizards, who had unusually blunt features.

Bridget ran, avoiding a barrage of red Stunning spells, as she headed for the emergency exit on the other side of the room, clutching her scrapbook close to her chest.

“*Bridget!*” Bridget just barely made out her mother’s terrified voice outside the emergency exit

door. “The Portkey – *hurry!*”

The blunt-faced wizard, no doubt the Death Eater Evelyn had recognized, started blasting spells at the ceiling. Fragments of plaster and wood started coming down in flaming fragments, setting the white tablecloths ablaze.

Dodging flames and red hexes, Bridget somehow made it outside. Evelyn held one of Charlotte’s arms securely with the hand not holding the Portkey, which had started to vibrate forebodingly.

“*Hurry*, Bridget!” said Charlotte, thrusting out a hand to take her daughter’s. “Take my hand!”

Bridget dashed forward, reaching for her mother –

But before she could reach her, she was snatched up by the neck of her shirt and yanked just out of Charlotte’s reach.

“Not so fast,” snarled the blunt-faced Death Eater.

“*BRIDGET!*” screamed Charlotte.

But before she or Evelyn could do anything, the Portkey activated and the two vanished into nothingness.

Bridget, her black eyes wide with terror upon the spot her mother had just been standing, looked up at the Death Eater holding her. His eyes flickered menacingly to the scrapbook clutched in her hands.

The scrapbook – *her* scrapbook, which held messages no one else could read, but had the names of her friends written into the inside cover –

In a flash, Bridget made up her mind. Slipping her wand from her jean pocket, she whispered,

“*Incendio.*”

The forest green Kransimir scrapbook burst into flame, and she threw it right at the blunt-faced Death Eater's face.

“*ARGH!*”

His grip loosened just enough that Bridget could pull herself free. She raised her wand.

“*Averte Sactum!*”

The Death Eater was blasted off his feet, tossed across the room like a rag doll. The other wizard shot another round of Stunning spells; Bridget ducked, darting up off the street as fast as her legs would take her.

Rose flew out of the fireplace of Hell's Kitchen, covered in soot. Mr. Whiskers yowled anxiously from her shoulder as she struggled to steady herself – she had only used the Floo Network a few times before, so she was far from practiced.

As soon as the small girl arrived, someone rushed to help her to her feet.

“Are you all right?!”

Rose looked up at a rather young-looking man, likely only a little older than Ron, with a rather large nose.

“Uh-huh,” she said nervously. “I’m – I’m looking for Professor Ramsay...”

The man smiled. “Well, you’re in the right place – I’m Beau.”

Colin and Dennis had just finished packing up three trunks (one each for their and their father's belongings) when a loud knock came from their door.

The two brothers immediately stiffened and turned to each other worriedly.

"Hold onto your wand," Colin whispered as he rose to his feet and moved toward the door. Dennis followed behind, likewise keeping a tight grip on the wand in his pocket.

Colin walked over to the front door, stopping just on the other side of the wood.

"Who's there?" he called harshly, his eyes narrowed.

"The biscuits you baked for me at your audition were almond-orange shortbread," the voice called back.

Both Creevey brothers gave a delighted start. Colin barreled forward, unlocking the door and throwing it open, to reveal a familiar figure with sharp blue eyes and blond hair dressed in black slacks and a collared blue shirt.

"*Professor Ramsay!*" the two boys cried in unison.

Ramsay gave them a very small smile, clearly pleased to see they were both safe.

"Your father's at a motel in the next town," he said solemnly. "Grab your things – we're leaving. *Now.*"

Who's Safe?

Once Hermione had confirmed that 12 Grimmauld Place was abandoned, she and Ron took out the three sleeping bags she'd packed in her beaded bag and set them up in the living room so that they and Harry could stay in the same room. They were all much too tense and terrified to sleep in separate rooms that night.

"Ron," said Hermione, "here..."

She summoned an orange leather-covered book from her bag.

"Daphne's scrapbook!" Ron realized, his mouth spreading into a weak smile.

"I knew you'd want to keep it with you," said Hermione, her brown eyes softening slightly as she handed it to him. "I figured it'd be a good way to stay in touch with everything else going on, while we're out searching for Horcruxes..."

Ron immediately opened the Kransimir scrapbook, flipping to the last page he'd read that morning before the wedding. The next few pages were filled with notes written by several different hands.

There are Death Eaters inside the Ministry. I don't know how, but my mum just sent me a message and I'm going to go help her. If they get their hands on the new MASTIF files, then they'll be able to find any witch or wizard they want! All of you, get somewhere safe! I'll write again as soon as I can!

Owen

Guys –

A friend of Ramsay's has come to pick up my mum and me and get us somewhere safe. She says

that Scrimgeour is dead and Bagnold has been accused of murdering him, but of course that can't be true, so the Death Eaters must have done something. She also said that Ramsay was supposed to go pick up Owen, but he must not have gotten there before Owen left...

I'll write more later!

Bridget

Bagnold is dead. Daphne and I overheard Father tell Mother that a Hit Wizard supposedly took her down with a well-aimed Killing Curse after she killed Scrimgeour, but when Father arrived to secure the crime scene, her body had already been moved. Father has his suspicions, but from the sound of things, Thicknesse wouldn't respond well to him articulating them – something's clearly wrong with Thicknesse, very wrong...

All of you, please stay safe!

Love from

Astoria

Dad, Dennis, and I are safe! Ramsay picked us up, and the three of us are now staying in a motel just outside Norfolk under assumed names. (I'm "Harry!" Ha!)

Ramsay says he's been arranging safe houses for people who need to hide from the Death Eaters; Mrs. Cauldwell sent him a Howler begging him to bring her family to one of them, but as Bridget said, Owen wasn't there when he arrived. Owen's grandmother Trudy and Pogo are already at a house somewhere in Suffolk, and Ramsay plans to send Owen there too as soon as he can find him.

Owen, when you read this, please tell us you're all right! Ramsay's worried about you.

Later,

Colin

I'm safe!

I'm at the safe house in Suffolk with Trudy and Pogo – one of Professor Ramsay's servers, Beau, owns it, and he brought me here. He said that someone had been sent to my house, but from the sound of things, that person didn't make it before the Mastiffs did. That's why I had to use the Floo Network and take it to Hell's Kitchen myself. Mum was supposed to be right behind me, but she never came. Beau says that he and Professor Ramsay will try to find her along with Owen and Mrs. Cauldwell...I hope they do. There are two other tenants behind a bookcase on the other side of the house (Trudy's and my room is hidden under the staircase), but I just haven't been in the mood to say "hello" yet.

Mr. Whiskers is really frightened. He hopes you're all okay, and your families too! Owen, please write soon!

xoxoxo

Rose

The news of Bagnold supposedly murdering Scrimgeour just appeared in a special edition of the Daily Prophet. According to the article, Aurors suspect that Bagnold's delusions about the Wizarding World's failings became so extreme that she decided to lash out against the current administration in a fit of madness! I could barely read a word of it – it read like something out of the Stormer! Pius Thicknesse has taken over as Minister of Magic, and he says he'll making new department appointments and instating new security measures tomorrow. Given the sort of stuff he and the rest of the Ministry has been saying, I dread what he might be planning!

Ron, is your family safe? Today's your brother's wedding, right? Did everyone get out okay? Owen, Kevin, Cho, Millicent, please write when you can!

Please, everyone, stay safe!

Hannah

My friends...

Owen is dead.

Mum was at the Ministry when it happened. She was among the Aurors sent to arrest Mrs. Cauldwell for supposedly "aiding and abetting a fugitive" (Bagnold); she was able to fight off the Imperius Curse someone had cast on her, but she couldn't save Cynthia and Owen. They were burning files in the MASTIF archives when a Killing Curse hit them both squarely in the side –

Mum reckons they were trying to protect the owners of those files from getting captured.

I'll write more later,

KeV/n

whO did it?! DOeS yoUr mother Know?! HoW did it hapPen?!

PLease reSPond!

COliN

Colin – if Mrs. Whitby was Imperiused, then the Auror who fired the Killing Curse must have been too; therefore it doesn't matter who it was. In the end, the only people we can blame are the Dark Lord and his followers.

Kevin – please support your mother. I'm sure witnessing something like that must have been very difficult.

Rose – you'll have to tell Trudy the news. I wish I could give some advice on how to do so. All I can remember is what Owen said, when he talked about dealing with grief – not to simply give condolences, but to show the willingness to listen.

Everyone...although I'm sure your hearts are as broken as mine, please take what shreds of comfort and strength I can offer. I don't know how to deal with these feelings...but in the words of Washington Irving, tears are not a mark of weakness, but of power.

KnOw that you are all in my prayers.

Arjuna

*I tOld trUdY aNd BeaU. I'M wrItiNg UPstairS sO TrUdy Can **b**e alone*

ROSe

It took me some time, but here's every picture of Owen I could find. I never noticed before how much his gaze would dart around the room, even when he was supposed to be focused on doing something – as if he was trying to drink up every square inch of whatever space he was in...

All of you, stay hidden and safe.

Daphne

Oh, everyone...I hate myself that I didn't have this on me when I went to work today! For all of you to have to deal with so much on your own...and what happened to Owen, too! I can't believe it...

I thank Merlin that Professor Ramsay and his staff were there for you, Bridget, Colin and Rose – if they hadn't been there, who knows what might have happened!

Bridget, have you and your mother arrived at the safe house? Kevin, where are you and your family now? Ron, are you, Harry, and Hermione all right? Millicent, is everything okay with you?

Please write soon,

Cho

Cho,

Mum, Dad, and I are safe: we're at our summer cottage. I won't say where it is, but I assure you, it's very remote. Mum deliberately picked it so we'd be far out enough that any magic we might cast would be completely out of view of everyone.

Rose, has Beau mentioned anything about where Bridget and her mother are staying? Is their safe house close to you?

Kevin

Beau says that Bridget and her mum were assigned to stay with one of his coworkers named Evelyn, and she doesn't live too far from here. He promised to check in with her when he goes out to meet with Professor Ramsay and the other "Helpers."

xoxoxo

Rose

I'm safe. But that's not important.

Mother was just offered the position of Head Scribe of the Wizengamot. Upon accepting, she was told that she would soon have a lot of new cases. Not only were there a lot of arrests made today, but there'll be a large number of house raids starting tomorrow morning. The raids will largely focus on those suspected of associating with Bagnold and the Cauldwells.

Our scrapbooks have Owen's name on the inside cover. That could be evidence, in the wrong hands.

MB

I HAVE A SOLUTION:

Attach some sort of colorful paper to both of the inside covers, front and back. Use a Permanent Sticking Charm or glue to securely fasten it. Make sure it's neat, and no one will know that there's anything underneath.

Stay safe,

Daphne

Daphne,

My book's all fixed! I was able to sneak some wrapping paper out of Dad's Christmas stash.

My love to all of you!

Hannah

Fixed. Lowry helped me cut and Permanently stick on some black fabric, since we don't have wrapping paper.

MB

I went ahead and did mine too, just in case Papa gets a hold of my scrapbook and asks about the names on the inside. Fortunately I had some spare parchment lying around, so I turned it into a sort of faux collage on the inside covers.

Has anyone heard anything about the Weasleys? I'm worried that we haven't heard anything from Ron – Potter would no doubt be a target, if the Ministry has been compromised the way I suspect.

Write when you know,

Arjuna

***BridgeT** didn't ma**Ke** it ba**CK** t**O** the safe h**OU**se!*

*EVelyn Went to go Pick u**P** ms. Jahee**M** and Bridget, but j**U**st as they W**Er**e ab**OU**t to take th**E** port**keY** ba**ck** t**O** the sa**Fe** house, One of th**E** Masti**FF**s g**R**abbed Bridget!! They pr**O**bably ha**Ve** her locked u**P** somewhere, a**LL** alone a**ND** s**C**ared – guys, what are We g**O**ing to DO!?*

RoSe

Lowry volunteered to look at the files of the new “clients” sent over by the Ministry: the people who were arrested today, supposedly on suspicion of conspiring against the Ministry and Wizard kind in general. Here were the names I recognized: Adrian Enrouge, Juliet Puddifoot, Marcus Belby, and George and Catherine Ketteridge. I’m sorry, Rose.

Bridget’s name is not on the list of those awaiting trial. Will try to see if I can find a list of those still “at large.”

Also noticed no mention of any trial for the Auror who killed Owen and Mrs. Cauldwell.

MB

Please don’t give up hope, Rose: at least we know your mother and stepfather are still alive.

It’ll be okay, everyone – if I know Bridget, she probably was able to slip right out of the Mastiffs’ clutches. I’m sure wherever she is, she’s safe, and she’ll contact us as soon as she can.

Kevin

Ron too – he’s always so resourceful, and if he’s got Harry and Hermione with him, he couldn’t be safer.

Keep up the faith!

Hannah

When Ron reached the end of the notes, his face was very pale. He flipped the next few pages over a few times, as if vainly praying that there were more messages that had somehow ended up on the wrong page.

“Ron?” murmured Hermione in concern.

As soon as Ron raised his head up to look at her, he felt tears flooding his eyes.

“...Owen is dead.”

Harry and Hermione’s eyes widened in shock.

“His mother too,” choked Ron. “They were trying to trash the MASTIF files before the Death Eaters could get at them – only...”

He broke off, his eyes going into shadow as he turned away.

“He was only *fourteen*,” he mumbled under his breath. “*Fourteen*...the only dueling spell I knew at fourteen was ‘*Expelliarmus*’ –”

Hermione hugged him from behind as best she could, burying her face into his back.

“Ron, I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

Harry didn’t speak, but he came over to sit on the floor next to Ron, bringing a hand onto his friend’s shoulder and squeezing. It was as if he knew there were no words he could say to mitigate what had happened.

It took Ron quite a while before he could force himself to write a very abbreviated message in his scrapbook.

Harry, Hermione, and I are safe. My family’s safe too, but under surveillance.

Bridget, please write as soon as you can.

Will write more tomorrow morning.

Ron

Rose knew she was supposed to be in the hidden room under the staircase, but she just couldn't force herself to disturb Trudy. She'd just lost both her daughter and her grandson in one day; as scared and upset Rose was about her mother and George's condition, she knew it paled in comparison to Trudy's anguish. So she had climbed the ladder out of the room, up through the trapdoor on the center landing of the L-shaped staircase, and hid in a closet inside the house.

Mr. Whiskers had not left Rose's side the entire time. He wasn't used to this new house or its smells yet, and Pogo the rather large golden retriever had not soothed the tiny kitten's nerves. Rose hadn't minded, though; given her gloomy mood, the company was more than welcome. Tucking her pink scrapbook under her arm, she got to her feet, opened the closet door, and peeked out into the hall. Once she verified that the coast was clear, she left the closet and walked up the hallway, Mr. Whiskers at her heels.

There was a bookcase around here somewhere, Rose knew – Beau had mentioned it...

She walked past a room that looked like a study, before immediately doing a double take. The bookcase inside was big enough to cover the entire back wall.

It took a little bit of fumbling around, but eventually Rose found the hidden handle on the side of the bookcase, lifted it, and slid the bookcase across the floor like an opening door.

Just on the other side was a room about the same size as the one she'd just left Trudy in, with bedroom furniture set up in a similar configuration. There was one bed on the right and another on the left, with two screens set up next to both of them in a weak attempt at privacy, as well as a small coffee table and floor pillows set up in the center of the room. Sitting at the coffee table was a pale, shorthaired, pink-lipped, hazel-eyed fourteen-year-old dressed in ripped jeans, gold stud earrings, and a beat-up blue Beatles T-shirt. It didn't take long for Rose to recognize the person at the table; she'd last seen them on a broom, scoring goals with the Quaffle back at Hogwarts.

"Noel Harwich?" she said in surprise.

A black cat only a little bigger than Mr. Whiskers and wearing a purple-checkered bowtie around his neck popped his head out from under the coffee table. Mr. Whiskers hunched up tensely as the slightly larger cat crept out and sniffed the air just over his head.

Harwich's hazel eyes narrowed critically upon Rose's face.

"...You were the commentator for our match against Gryffindor...Rose Zeller, right?"

"Yeah!" said Rose.

She immediately put a hand out as if to shake Harwich's. Harwich stared at Rose's outstretched hand, as if confused about what to do with it. Undeterred, the Hufflepuff kept talking.

"You did really well in that match, you know," she said conversationally. "Your flying was amazing! That one dive you did, to get Dean off your tail – the Wronsky Feint? Oh, and the way you scored that goal by bouncing the Quaffle off one of the goal posts and then hitting it with your broom – *wow!* You must've worked really hard to get that good."

Harwich looked flustered by the rush of praise.

"Um, yes," they said uncomfortably.

They glanced down again at Rose's hand, which she still had not withdrawn. Rose cracked a playful grin.

"You know, you're supposed to shake it."

Harwich's face creased with some irritation. "I *know* that – "

"Well, then!" Rose said brightly, grabbing their hand in hers. "It's very nice to meet you formally, Noel Harwich...wish it was under better circumstances, of course, but nice all the same!"

She released their hand once she had heartily shaken it twice. Harwich stared at Rose like they hadn't encountered anyone quite like her. Then they gave a weak smile in return.

"...Heh. Right."

Rose smiled down at the bow-tied black cat touching noses with a still rather nervous-looking Mr. Whiskers.

“Your kitty’s awful sweet with Mr. Whiskers!”

Harwich’s hazel eyes fell on the cats too. “Darcy likes everybody.”

“Even Mrs. Norris?” teased Rose.

“Yes,” Harwich said dryly, “though of course Darcy’s feelings aren’t returned.”

Rose giggled. She then looked up curiously toward the other end of the room. Just behind a dark green screen she could see the outline of a figure lying down in bed.

Harwich noticed her focus and scowled at the screen.

“I’d recommend leaving him be,” they muttered sourly. “He’s a pain in the arse on his good days – I frankly don’t know why the hell Ramsay decided to help him out at all...”

“Why?” asked Rose.

“Because he’s Death Eater scum,” Harwich snarled.

“Better than brain-addled Mudblood filth,” sneered a voice behind the screen.

Rose got to her feet, shifting around so she could look around the barrier.

Sitting up in the bed was a very pale man with a gaunt face, two prosthetic arms made of iron and dark brown leather, and long white-blond hair tied back in a sophisticated ponytail.

It would've been difficult for Rose to recognize the once proud Death Eater Lucius Malfoy, were it not for his striking resemblance to his son, Draco.

R.J. Moon

August 2, 1997

Hey guys, here's the update I promised with what happened on my side:

I didn't see any of your messages until we finally made it into hiding, as I'd left my scrapbook up in my room during the wedding. Harry, Hermione, and I were at the reception when Kingsley sent his Patronus as a message, warning us all that the Ministry had fallen. Hermione was able to Apparate us to a Muggle street in London away from the action. She also fortunately had packed everything we could've needed in case of a quick getaway in a bag with a Portable Extension Charm she did herself – I'll never get over how bloody brilliant she is...

Anyway, we settled down in a café to figure out what to do next, but just a few minutes after we arrived, two Death Eaters caught up with us. We were able to Stun them and modify their and the café worker's memories, but we still have no idea how they caught up with us so fast. We know it can't be an issue of Harry still having the Trace on him, as he turned 17 yesterday, but it still worried us. Do any of you have any ideas?

We arrived at an old safe house of the Order's last night safe and sound, though old Mad-Eye had left some rather nasty security spells that we had to contend with first, in case Snape somehow found his way there. I don't think we'll have to worry about that, though; the security scared us to death, so I can't imagine how bad it'd be on Snape.

Bridget, please check in when you can.

Ron

You guys,

I met my "neighbors" behind the bookcase last night! Also living in the house is Noel Harwich, Ravenclaw's newest Chaser; their adorable black cat Darcy (named after Mr. Darcy from Pride and Prejudice, according to Noel); and get this: LUCIUS MALFOY! Draco Malfoy's father! I don't know his whole story, but from what I gather from Noel, he apparently almost died on one of You-Know-Who's missions from Death's Head acid, and his family decided it'd be safer to pretend he was dead and put him in hiding. I'm surprised Ramsay helped him, considering how much he hates

Death Eaters, but it was pretty good of him. Mr. Malfoy hasn't been very nice so far, but I can't help but wonder if it's partially due to the pain he's in; Noel says he has episodes of waking up screaming in the middle of the night, which Beau says is probably due to "phantom pain" from the arms and leg he lost. Beau's actually really worried that Mr. Malfoy could unintentionally blow our cover, since he hasn't found a way to deaden the sound.

Trudy is still pretty bad off. Pogo hasn't left her side since he arrived, though he keeps looking up whenever anyone comes into our room, as if hoping Owen will be with them. I feel so terrible...

Write back soon, you all! Bridget, we love you.

xoxoxo

Rose

*Rose – **Lucius Malfoy?! Really?! Ramsay should've just let him waste out there on his own: he doesn't deserve help!***

Beau's right on the "phantom pain" stuff, though; I went through some of that when I was in St. Mungo's. The way Jengu explained it to me, even though my limbs weren't gone, they wouldn't respond when my brain tried to make them move, so the pain was in response to those dead-end messages. I can't say I feel any remorse about that git Lucius Malfoy going through that kind of pain, though – serves him right, I'd say.

If Beau needs help shutting that bastard up, tell him to use the spell Muffliato on the walls inside that room, using an "X"-like wand movement. It'll deaden the sound and restrain it to just that room, so it can't echo through the walls. It won't help Noel much, unfortunately, but at least your cover won't be blown.

Hope it helps!

Ron

Rose – I'm shocked too. I can't believe the Malfoys actually asked Professor Ramsay for help; they

must have been really desperate... I'm also surprised Professor Ramsay trusted them enough to hide Lucius; from the sound of things, it'd be dangerous for Mr. Malfoy to try to run back to You-Know-Who now considering he accepted Professor Ramsay's help at all, but I still would be worried he might try to rat you all out to save his own skin. Please be careful, Rose...

Ron – Regardless of a man's deeds, you should never just let him suffer, let alone die, if you have any power to help him. We must have some way to differentiate ourselves from the monsters we're fighting.

Everyone, please stay safe. Bridget, you're in our hearts and minds...

Love from

Astoria

Rose – I'm so glad to hear Noel's all right!! I couldn't be happier to hear that you two will be able to look after each other...

Ron – I can't imagine it'd be the Trace, but fortunately while you're in a house with protective magic, any magic you do use should be undetectable, even if Harry were still under it. Mum worked in the Improper Use of Magic office, and she says that a Secret Keeper's enchantment can make it harder for other witches and wizards to track underage magic.

Bridget – please be safe!

Love,

Cho

August 3, 1997

News from my mother's case desk: four more "threats" arrested last night. Didn't recognize any of

the names, fortunately.

MB

Hi, guys,

Our house and Dad's office were raided this morning. Your idea worked like a charm, Daphne – the Mastiffs barely gave my scrapbook a second look!!

Bridget, we're thinking of you – please be safe. That goes for the rest of you, too!

Love,

Hannah

Father's just been promoted to the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. He's wanted to climb the ladder at the Ministry for a long while, but I don't know why in the world Thicknesse assigned him to that Department in particular – Father has never been one to socialize, let alone with strangers. I can't help but feel he would've been far better suited to a position in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, as that's where he works now.

Bridget, please write soon.

Love from

Daphne

I suspect Father got the position more for blood than for any qualifications. Father would probably have turned down the position if he felt he could.

Astoria

Hi, guys,

We're still safe. Not much to write about right now, unfortunately, given we're still in hiding, but I wanted to update all the same.

I've been baking a lot in the kitchen lately, to try to cheer Mum and Dad up. Whenever I am, I'm thinking of being back in the kitchens with you all – I can't wait until we're all back there again.

Be safe, Bridget – we believe in you!

Kevin

Ron,

Great suggestion with that spell! Trudy tried it on the screen in front of Mr. Malfoy's bed since Beau is a Squib, and it worked perfectly! Noel told me they had the best sleep they've had since they got here. Trudy also cast it on both of our rooms too, so that any sound we make won't go through the walls either.

Love you, Bridget!

xoxoxo

Rose

August 4, 1997

*Thicknesse's new appointments were just announced in the Daily Prophet, and as we feared, most of them are just terrible! Corban Yaxley as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Antonin Dolohov as Head Auror, Etienne Montmercy as Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, and Dolores Umbridge as the new head of MASTIF! The Prophet doesn't even mention that three of them are Death Eaters; instead it just talks about their job experience, as if they were never with You-Know-Who at all! But we caught them at Hogwarts – we saw them, dozens of people saw them! It's just...**disgusting!** When I first read the article, I felt like screaming!*

The Prophet also mentioned your parents' promotions, Millicent and Daphne and Astoria. I couldn't help but notice Mr. Greengrass doesn't look too happy in his picture, though...

I begged Dad to go with me to look for Bridget, but we couldn't find her anywhere. The space where Lottie's was is nothing but rubble; the Muggles say it caught fire, but I think we all know it was no accident.

Please write soon, Bridget!

Love,

Hannah

Hannah – Father never looks happy. But this time I think it may have been justified.

I'm enclosing some pressed flowers, for those of you trapped indoors. I thought the smell might be welcoming.

Stay safe, all of you – you especially, Bridget.

Daphne

August 6, 1997

Thank you for the flowers, Daphne! They're really quite pretty – maybe next time we see each other you or Astoria can show me how to press flowers too?

I wish I could tape in the chocolate crepes I made this morning for Mum and Dad, but I guess you all will just have to imagine them.

Stay strong, Bridget!

Kevin

Everyone,

It's so eerie knowing how much has changed in Britain, when it's so peaceful here in the States. No one has any idea how dangerous things have become, even at the MACUSA. I overheard someone at the Department of International Magical Cooperation talking about how the new Head of the British Department would be visiting soon (I had to listen in, given that they mentioned your father, Daphne and Astoria!), but she sounded so blasé about it. No one knows that the British Ministry has been sabotaged! I've told a few coworkers that things back home aren't that great, but I've had to be careful, as I don't want to tell anyone about our scrapbooks. It's so hard to know how much to say and how much to keep under wraps...

The new tenant from South Carolina moved into our apartment complex today. Her name is Amanda, and she's a Music and Theater major from a Muggle school called Winthrop University. She acts, sings, dances, and plays the violin – she played a song called Shenandoah for me today, and it was just beautiful. I think she and Marietta would get along really well, were she here.

I promised Owen I'd take a picture of the Statue of Liberty, so here it is. I apologize about the slight shakiness; I was having trouble keeping my hands steady.

Please stay safe, all of you! Bridget, you too!

Love,

Cho

August 7, 1997

Finally tracked down a list of people who evaded capture. Here are the names I recognized: Harry Potter, Terence and Evander Goodfellow, Donaghan Tremlett, Katsuji Yamazaki, Eleanor Bradstone, Jimmy Peakes, and Bridget Jaheem. They're all considered "at large."

MB

Arjuna's stomach clenched as she read Millicent's most recent note. On the one hand, it was good news that those people hadn't been captured yet...but on the other hand, not knowing where they were was terrifying. To think of Bridget out there, on her own – and for Terence Goodfellow and his husband to be missing too! Goodfellow had been the last sympathetic voice left at the *Daily Prophet*; if he was gone, then the paper was truly lost.

She glanced at the clock by her bed: *10:19 PM*. Her mother would've gone to bed 49 minutes ago; she always went to bed at the same time. Her father was more variable, partially because of the longer hours he'd been working. Mr. Belaji had looked visibly ill the last week, but of course, being an Unspeakable, he couldn't tell his wife or daughter what he'd been working on. That lack of knowledge had never bothered Arjuna more than it did right now...

Trying to calm her stomach, Arjuna closed her Kransimir scrapbook and got up from her bed, ducking under the floating candles she'd set up in her room. Then she crept downstairs as quietly as she could, hugging her dark blue dressing gown around herself.

There was only one window in the Belajis' safe house. It was in the kitchen, just over the sink, and had been enchanted by Mrs. Belaji so that one could only look out of the house and not into it. Anyone trying to look in would only see an empty, though perfectly pleasant little house, with the lights on in the daytime and off at night.

It had been very difficult being trapped in the house for months. Arjuna had hated being cooped up so much that she had taken to looking out the window at night, after her mother had gone to sleep. She'd also sneaked out a few times to send owls, but...well, now that would be far too dangerous, wouldn't it?

Pop.

Arjuna stiffened visibly at the sound outside. It almost sounded like someone casting a spell –

Pop. Pop, pop.

Through the kitchen window Arjuna caught sight of several flashes of multi-colored light in the distance and her heart leapt into her throat.

There was a wizard's duel going on outside.

Arjuna squinted through the black, watching the spells dart through the darkness. She could just barely make out the shape of three figures illuminated by the colored flares; one of them, a tall figure, had been backed up into a corner, leaning his back against the wall as if he were injured, as he blasted hexes at two masked assailants.

'Death Eaters,' Arjuna realized, horrified.

A moment later, the two Death Eaters were blasted off their feet by a strong blast of yellow and flung to the ground in a heap.

There was silence. Nothing and no one moved. It was too pitch-black to see anything, including the fate of the injured wizard.

Feeling a flash of concern, Arjuna made up her mind. Whipping out her wand, she left the house, closing the front door behind her so that no one unaware of the Secret protecting the house could access it, and cautiously darted out toward the street corner where she'd last seen the wizard. She passed the two Stunned Death Eaters on the ground and found her way to the edge of an alley.

“Hello?” she called only as loud as she dared.

Something shifted. As her eyes adjusted to the pitch black, Arjuna could just barely make out the outline of a figure crumpled up on the ground. She squinted, struggling to see his face; she wanted to light her wand, but knew if she used magic, she’d probably set off the Trace on her. It was one thing when she was in the safe house, where the protective magic shielded her from exact detection – but out on the street, in the open...

“I know you’re a wizard,” Arjuna hissed under her breath, keeping her voice as level as possible. “Identify yourself.”

The man on the ground gave a choke.

“...*Lumos*.”

The wand in the figure’s hand lit up, revealing a young man dressed in red Auror robes. He was clutching at his shoulder, which was bleeding freely, and he blinked up through the light of his wand at Arjuna, his hazel eyes half-lidded.

Arjuna just about had a heart attack when she recognized who it was.

“*Eddie Carmichael?*”

Carmichael gave a weak smile. “...Hi, Arjuna.”

Arjuna bent down next to him, immediately bringing an arm under his injured one to help him stand.

“Come on – let’s get you inside,” she said quickly.

“No – ” choked Carmichael. He indicated the Death Eaters on the ground. “They’ve – seen too much – I’ve got to – *ack* – ”

Arjuna supported his shaking arm as he tried to lift it.

“O-*Obliviate*,” he said, pointing his wand at each of the Death Eaters in turn.

White light swirled out of his wand, connecting it to the two prone men’s heads and then dissolving away. Then, with some difficulty, Arjuna carried Carmichael into the house.

Arjuna was no Healer. Fortunately she’d lived in the same dorm as Astoria for the last four years, so she knew dittany would be a good herb to try. With some help from one of the books in her mother’s extensive library, Arjuna also managed to clean and bandage Carmichael’s shoulder.

“There,” she said. “That should help.”

“Much obliged,” Carmichael murmured under his breath.

Arjuna looked up at him, frowning critically. “What are you doing out here, anyway? I thought the Auror department was helping out the Mastiffs.”

Carmichael smiled coldly. “Don’t you mean the ‘*Muggle-Born Registration Commission*?’”

Arjuna was taken aback.

“That’s what some people have been calling it,” said Carmichael. His expression grew darker: disgusted. “Umbridge acts like it’s just a cute little pet name, but we’re wondering if she hopes it’ll stick – you know, call it that enough times, and that’ll be what everyone calls it...and after all, that’s pretty much what it’s doing anyway...sometimes they go after Guilders or ex-Order members or Squibs or werewolves, but it’s mostly Muggle-borns. We all know it...or, at least, those of us who use our *brains* know it.”

Carmichael adjusted himself in the chair, holding his shoulder as he did so.

“But...” he said grimly, “people *aren’t* using their brains, unfortunately. They’re too scared. They

don't know what's true or what's false, who's a threat and who isn't – and without knowing any of that, they just...shut down. Revert back into scared children, cowering at the coattails of whoever offers them protection...even if those people are Death Eaters masquerading as Ministry workers.”

Arjuna glanced down at his bandaged shoulder, her black eyes narrowing slightly.

“You didn't answer my question,” she said quietly. “What are you doing here?”

Carmichael's lips curled up in a wry smile. Raising his uninjured hand, he took a letter out from the inside pocket of his robes. It had been opened and marked with a purple “OPS” stamp, and the address on the outside written in black cursive read:

Terence Goodfellow

Daily Prophet Headquarters

London

Arjuna's black eyes flickered, looking from Carmichael to down at the envelope questioningly.

“This was sent to the *Daily Prophet*, but got confiscated by the OPS, who sent it to the Ministry,” Carmichael explained lightly. “Fortunately I was able to snatch it before it reached Umbridge's desk. It had the street name the owl had been sent from, so it was likely that the Aurors would've been sent to investigate that area, so as to capture the sender. Unfortunately I caught the eye of two Death Eaters on my way here...likely suspicious about why a new Auror was traveling around on his own...”

He slid a sheet of folded parchment out of the envelope, shaking it open with one hand.

“*“If our new Minister thinks to appoint criminals and terrorists to lead us from evil,” he read aloud, “then he need only expect doom as a result. And worse still, should he think that interning the innocent shall raise our spirits, then he can only expect to fall hard himself – sic semper tyrannis.”*”

Carmichael looked up at Arjuna out the corner of his hazel eye.

“I had my suspicions for a while,” he admitted, “given Greengrass’s nickname for you, but there’s only one person I know of who is that comfortable with Latin.”

His smile spread as wide as a Cheshire grin.

“*R.J. Moon*. Ar. Jay. Moon. Ar – juh – oon – ah.”

There was a silence. Then Arjuna crossed her arms.

“Congratulations,” she said lowly, no trace of humor or joy on her face. “You figured it out.”

Carmichael’s hazel eyes twinkled.

“The only thing I don’t get is why you didn’t tell anyone,” he said with a slight frown. “Does *Greengrass* even know?”

“She does,” said Arjuna, “but not because I told her – she figured it out, like you did, on the last day of term.”

She glanced out the one-way window, her crossed arms tightening slightly around herself.

“I didn’t tell because I knew how much my words meant, while I was anonymous,” she explained simply. “People read what I wrote, when they could imagine me however they liked. They could imagine me as this wise, older figure, preaching truth...or even just offering a new point of view. If they knew that I was only a fifteen-year-old student, though...anyone who disagreed with me would be able to immediately write off what I said – claim I was too young to know what I was talking about – laugh about how they were supposed to take advice from some ‘*child*.’ Everything I said could be invalidated simply because of my age. So in order to keep that secret, and ensure my words kept their power, I had to make sure no one suspected...not even my friends.”

Carmichael’s face softened significantly.

“Well, you’ve got a real talent for words, Belaji, regardless of your age,” he said. “You could really do some good, with that kind of writing...”

Arjuna snorted coldly. “Not anymore – Goodfellow was the last person who could’ve published my letters, and now he’s gone.”

Carmichael’s hazel eyes narrowed slightly. “Maybe not the *last* one...”

He got up, his posture strong despite his injured shoulder.

“People don’t know that they need to fight back because they don’t know what’s going on,” he said solemnly. “Roger Davies and I have been trying to get the word out by making fliers, but we know what we’ve written hasn’t stuck. People throw the fliers out, more often than not. But people will read what *you* say – what *R.J. Moon* says...”

“What are you suggesting?” Arjuna asked, her black eyes narrowing.

A dynamic grin spread across Carmichael’s face.

“That you keep writing,” he said determinedly, “and that we keep printing.”

The Creeveys' Departure

August 8, 1997

Millicent,

I'm so glad that Katsuji and Bridget were able to escape the raids! Katsuji doesn't live far from London, so maybe they'll be able to find each other and help each other stay safe. I'm sure they'll be all right – they're both so clever.

Mum's birthday is coming up soon – anyone have any suggestions on what kind of cake I should make for her? Dad agreed to help me buy and smuggle in the right ingredients.

I believe in all of you!

Kevin

Millicent,

Thanks for the update. Hermione has said that any news of Bridget should be good news, but I admit, I think I'd feel better if she could write and tell us where she is. I hope you're right, Kevin, that they were able to find each other...maybe they found Peakes too.

Professor Lupin swung by the safe house for a short while, and while he was here, he mentioned that things have gotten really bad at the Ministry. Not only have they been more openly going after Muggles and Muggle-borns, but also Harry is now wanted for supposedly being involved with Dumbledore's murder! It's ridiculous!

Speaking of the Ministry, Daphne, Astoria, Millicent, Arjuna, how much can you tell me about how it's operating? I daresay security is probably tighter, when you're entering it – how do they regulate those using the Floo Network to commute?

Kevin – Mum used this great treacle and ginger sponge recipe when making Harry's birthday cake this year. Maybe you could make something like that?

Later,

Ron

Millicent – I'm so glad to hear about Bridget! And the Goodfellows too. I miss Goodfellow's articles; the Prophet seems so lifeless without them...

Ron – How could anyone blame Harry?! I can't believe anyone would even suggest such a thing! It's good to hear Professor Lupin is all right, though...

Kevin – For my mum's birthday, I always liked making her a blackberry pie in place of a cake, as it was her favorite. I don't know how well your mum likes pies, but it might be a nice change of pace!

Love,

Hannah

Ron –

What little I've learned about the Ministry is not pleasant. Apparently MASTIF is tracking Muggle-borns more blatantly now, to the point that people are nicknaming it the "Muggle-born Registration Commission." Fear seems to be more rampant inside their walls as well, to the point that many employees are just trying to keep their heads down and do as they're told, as the Prophet has given them only misleading scraps of information and they don't know who they can trust and who they can't. If there's going to be any chance of alerting those people and their families to the danger they're in, then someone will have to find a way to get the word out.

Stay safe, everyone!

Arjuna

P.S. Kevin, given your talent with sweet desserts, maybe a chocolate mousse cake might do the trick?

August 9, 1997

Hi guys!

Dennis, Dad, and I are finally leaving the hotel today! Ramsay's helped us find a new house in Glasgow under new identities; Dad refused to completely go underground since he wants to keep providing for us. Dennis will have to pretend he's two years younger so he can continue Muggle schooling, while I'll have to pretend I'm two years older so I can go straight to work. I hope there'll be some newspaper jobs I can go out for, but Dad said it might be tricky to land anything big without a degree. Ramsay said I should try looking into culinary work, as kitchen porters and servers are often hired more for merit than what school they graduated from.

*I agree, Hannah: you'd have to be bonkers to think that Harry would have ever, ever, **EVER** hurt Dumbledore, and everyone with a brain knows that! I know you think everyone's afraid, Arjuna, but surely they can't be stupid enough to believe something like that?!*

“Harry. Cedric.”

Colin looked up from his scrapbook. His father was standing in the doorway of their hotel room, clearly ready to go.

Like his sons, Roger Creevey was a small, scrawny man with a large mouth that often (though not presently) was curled up in a smile. His mousy brown hair was noticeably thinner than Dennis's, enough that he'd started wearing a beige flat cap to cover up the beginnings of a bald spot on the top of his head. His warm brown eyes moved from his two sons sitting on the bed to over his shoulder, as if making sure no one was watching them.

“...It's time to go,” he said quietly. It was clear that speaking softly wasn't natural to him, given how garbled his voice sounded when squeezed into the back of his throat.

Dennis (alias “Cedric”) slid off the bed and glanced at Colin (alias “Harry”), whose ballpoint pen was still hovering over his open Kransimir scrapbook.

“Kay!” Colin said quickly. “Just a sec – ”

He scribbled a rabid ending to his letter:

Ramsay's sent one of his "Helpers" to drive us to Brampton Station and make sure we get onto our train safely. We'll then get off at Kings Cross, where another one of Ramsay's friends will accompany us to another train that will then take us the rest of the way to Glasgow. Will write more once we get onboard!

Cheers!

Colin

Once he signed his name, Colin closed the book and stowed it and his pen into his saddlebag. Then, tossing the bag strap over his shoulder, he followed Dennis and Mr. Creevey out of the hotel room.

The drive to the train station took over an hour. Mr. Creevey tried to keep the drive pleasant by telling jokes and sharing stories, and fortunately their Helper – a rather pretty blonde in a bright white dress named Rachelle – was rather nice as well. When she wasn't working as a server in Ramsay's restaurant, she participated in a non-profit show choir, so she would regularly switch out the music in the car and sing along with her favorite songs.

When they finally reached Brampton Station, Rachelle valet-parked her red Fiesta, helped the Creeveys unload their trunks, and walked with them to the station.

"The person escorting you to your next platform will meet you as soon as you get off the train at Kings Cross," Rachelle told them, smiling kindly despite the urgency of their walk. "They'll be all dressed in white too, so they should be easy enough to spot..."

The group reached the outdoor platform just as the mustard yellow train was pulling in. Dennis and Colin each gave Rachelle a big hug of gratitude before climbing on board after their father, waving goodbye to her through the window. She waved widely in return, mouthing, "*GOOD LUCK!*" as the train pulled out of the station, and the three kept waving until they could no longer see each other.

The two-hour ride to Kings Cross went off without a hitch. When the Creeveys arrived at the London train station and disembarked, they found themselves caught in the chaotic rush of vacationing families and rush-hour commuters.

It was surreal being here, Colin thought to himself. If he'd arrived just two weeks later, he'd be on his way to Hogwarts...who knew, though, if he'd ever see that wonderful place again...?

Mr. Creevey noticed his older son's misty expression and brought an arm around him, startling Colin out of his reverie.

"I know it's hard," Mr. Creevey said gently. "But remember: keep your chin up! Can't see how beautiful the sunrise is, if you're too busy looking down at your shoes, now can you?"

Colin gave his father a weak smile and leaned into him lightly.

"...Thanks, Dad."

"Ahem."

The Creeveys looked up.

Standing in front of them was an old man dressed in a pair of stained white trousers, a white shirt, and an old-fashioned white suit jacket. He looked rather surly; the wrinkles on his face spoke to how little this man had likely smiled in his life, given how much they gathered around his brow line and his sharp blue eyes. His graying hair was starting to recede, which made his forehead look longer than it should have been.

"*'Ian Wright?'*" the surly-looking man asked coolly.

Recognizing the alias he'd signed into the hotel under, Mr. Creevey smiled at the old man. "Yes! Nice to m – "

"Come along then," the man cut him off shortly. "Best get you on board smartly."

He turned and started walking away from the platform, moving quite quickly despite the limp in his leg. Mr. Creevey glanced at his sons, who looked just as baffled as he was; then the three

hurried after him.

Unlike Rachelle, their second Helper seemed to have no interest in pleasantries. Even though Mr. Creevey tried to engage him both by thanking him for his help and through small talk, the surly-looking man barely spoke at all. The most response he would give to Mr. Creevey's remarks was the occasional grunt or snort.

'What a tosser!' thought Colin, exchanging a sour look with Dennis. *'How in the world did Ramsay ever meet such a grump? He acts like he doesn't like helping us at all!'*

When they reached Platform 10 on the other side of Kings Cross, the old man single-handedly lifted the Creevey family's trunks into the luggage compartment (he'd refused to let anyone help him) and then turned to Colin and Dennis, his eyes narrowed critically.

"Now, then," he growled, "keep your heads down and *blend in*. I know that's not the easiest thing to do for dodgy ankle-biters like you, but it's the loudest birds that get shot down first. Got that?"

Colin and Dennis fixed the man with identically irritated expressions.

"Got it," Dennis muttered coldly.

"Don't see how you can get off calling us dodgy, though," Colin added sharply, his brown eyes flashing.

"Colin – " started Mr. Creevey.

The surly-looking Helper held up a hand to quiet him. Then, very deliberately, he turned to fully face Colin, bending down slightly so that his sharp blue eyes bore into Colin's angry brown.

"I call things as I see them, boy," he said very lowly.

"Reckon I should too, then, you old knob?" Colin shot back harshly.

Mr. Creevey tried to step between the old man and his son, but the Helper once again stopped him. He studied Colin for a long moment; then, very slowly, his lips curled up into a very dark smile.

“...You magic brats are too cocky for your own good,” he said softly. “Just because you have magic, you neglect using your heads – think you’re invincible, don’t think through the consequences of your actions. You’re uppity little troublemakers, unable to keep your mouth shut and yourselves safe. You’re all alike...”

Then, amazingly, his smile twitched, gaining a bizarre, almost bittersweet quality.

“Yet...there’s only one other boy I know who was brave enough to talk back to me like that. He was brash - hot-tempered - stubborn as a mule - just like his old man. More so, even - stubborn enough to come for me, even after I’d long since given up coming for him...”

His tired smile broadened, showing white teeth.

“I think I can see why Gordon speaks so highly of you, *‘Harry Wright.’*”

Colin blinked, taken completely aback. The Helper straightened up, his dark smile inching into the wrinkles on the sides of his sharp blue eyes. Yet that cynical expression, with those eyes...seemed almost out of place. Colin suddenly realized he had seen a pair of sharp blue eyes just like those crinkled up with a much more genuine, less jaded grin – sparkling when their owner had tried Colin’s almond-orange shortbread biscuits –

Colin’s brown eyes grew very wide.

‘Ramsay...?’

Before he could say a word, however, a loud, deep *whoosh* echoed around them, and the station was abruptly punctuated with cacophonous blasts.

BANG! BANG, BANG!

Green flares flew through the air, smashing into the walls and colliding head-on with random

bystanders, throwing them off their feet. One spell collided with a newspaper kiosk, sending scraps of flaming paper into the air. People screamed and ran, trying to evade the explosions of color, as two, three, four more black-robed Death Eaters Apparated into the room in echoing *cracks*.

The surly-looking man, his eyes very wide and his face pitch white with terror, abruptly brought his arms onto Colin's shoulders and roughly shoved him toward Mr. Creevey.

"Get onto the train! It should give you some cover, if you're out of sight and quiet – "

"No!" Dennis argued. "We can help – we can fight – !"

"And set off the Trace on you, broadcasting your location to the *entire Wizarding World*?" the old man shot back fiercely, his sharp blue eyes trying to be cruel but appearing much too frightened. "Don't be daft, boy! Mr. Wright, you and your boys get on that train *NOW*!"

Colin was ready to say "*damn the Trace*" and run out into the fray anyway, but Mr. Creevey abruptly grabbed both of his sons around the middle with his arms, pulling them onto the train after him.

"Dad!"

"Dad, *get off*!"

Both Dennis and Colin struggled against their father's grip as their surly-faced Helper turned back toward the melee, looking very scared as he jumped behind one of the pillars to get out of the line of fire. A Muggle family ran for cover just past him, only to be stopped when their young, clean-shaven patriarch was blasted with a green Killing Curse and thrown to the ground just yards away.

Seeing the chaos through the train window made Colin squirm in Mr. Creevey's grip even more.

"Dad – let – *go*!"

"The man's *right*, Colin!" said Mr. Creevey, even though it clearly pained him to say it. "If you or Dennis use magic, then we'll be exposed! The Ministry will know where we are!"

“We can’t just *sit* here!” Colin yelled, his brown eyes filling up with frustrated tears.

The Helper, seeing the mother and son vainly trying to wake the clean-shaven figure on the ground, immediately grabbed hold of their hands and yanked them behind the pillar he’d been hiding behind, instructing them to stay low and quiet. Then, darting out from behind the pillar, he ran across the station, drawing the Death Eaters’ fire away from the Muggle family, before he could duck behind another pillar closer to the train.

“MR. RAMSAY!” Colin shouted through the glass, over the roar of spells. “MR. RAMSAY, *COME ON!*”

The surly-faced Helper looked up at Colin, startled. Colin looked at him pleadingly through the train window, gesturing to him to get on board too, out of the line of fire –

But before Gordon Ramsay, Sr. could have made such a movement, the pillar he was hiding behind exploded, hit by three orange Bombardment spells in unison.

BAM!

Mr. Creevey pulled both of his sons down onto the floor as the train windows were smashed open, sending shards of glass into the compartment. Colin lifted his head, his face going very pale as he looked through the shattered window.

The entire section of station floor where Gordon Ramsay, Sr. had been hiding was gone. All that remained was the measly, fragmented remains of the stone pillar and a large crater in the ground. When Colin squinted through the dust thrown into the air by the blast, he caught sight of a crumpled-up, mangled, lifeless form covered in blood and touched with flecks of white lying in a heap in the base of the crater. It took the young Gryffindor a minute to realize that the white was fabric, like that on an old-fashioned white suit jacket.

With a sudden burst of strength, Colin wrenched himself out of his father’s grip.

“COLIN, *NO!*” shouted Mr. Creevey.

But Colin didn't listen. He ran off of the train, yanking out his wand as he went. He headed straight for the Death Eater closest to him, raised his wand –

BANG!

Out of nowhere a red Stunning spell shot from the opposite direction, colliding with the Death Eater and throwing him to the ground. More Stunners shot through the air at all sides as several figures in different-colored cloaks darted through the fog of spells, blasting hexes with their wands. One figure, dark-skinned with a mass of dreadlocks, dashed over to Colin's side.

"*Lee?*" Colin cried, his eyes lighting up.

"Hey, Colin!" Lee Jordan greeted him brightly. "Long time no see!"

The ex-Quidditch commentator grabbed the top of Colin's head, making him duck along with him to avoid an ice blue spell being shot at them. Then, bringing an arm around the smaller boy, Lee led him back toward the train.

"What are you *doing* here?" Colin asked.

Lee summoned a Shield Charm around Colin and himself to protect them from a cluster of rubble hurling itself through the air toward them.

"I've been putting together this new radio station – something to help get the news out, since the *Prophet* won't," Lee explained, speaking to Colin over his shoulder while his gaze and wand were preoccupied with the falling debris. "I just got it on the air when I received some news from this group of Ministry insiders – they're calling themselves the Abraxans, you know, like the white winged horses? Anyway, one of the Abraxans sent me a Howler that I played on air for everyone to hear, and he had two pieces of fresh news: 1, the Abraxans have enlisted R.J. Moon as chief writer of their pamphlets, and 2, Kings Cross will be the subject of several raids, so as to track down potential Muggle-born runaways –"

"Like us," Colin realized, horrified.

Lee nodded grimly as he led the younger boy back to the open door of the train.

“The Aurors will be here soon, to clean up the damage,” Lee said urgently, “but as they modify the Muggles’ memories, they’ll be searching for Muggle-born fugitives. Your train *needs* to leave before they arrive.”

Lee pushed Colin back onto the train. Colin, however, resisted moving further.

“But...how *can* it leave?” he asked anxiously. “No train conductor would drive their train out like this – they’d be too scared of the explosions – ”

Lee grinned. “Don’t worry – George is already taking care of that.”

The train’s whistle gave an abrupt *toot* that made Colin jump. He looked up at the billowing white smoke over his head to down at Lee, his mouth agape.

“Don’t need the Imperius Curse if you use enough Confundus and Memory Charms,” Lee said with a light shrug. “Now get on out of here – get somewhere safe!”

“What about you?” said Colin.

“Don’t worry,” laughed Lee. “I’m like a cat, I’ve got nine lives!”

The train started to move. Colin clung onto the edge of the doorframe, as Lee ran down the platform after him, magically repairing the shattered train windows.

“Oh – and when you want news, tune into Potterwatch!” he called after him, struggling to be heard over the engines. “Tap a radio with your wand tonight at 9 – the first password’s ‘*Albus!*’”

Lee finally had to stop running as the platform came to an end, and Colin’s vision was obscured with the blackened tunnel that led out of Kings Cross Station.

Rose and Lucius

August 10, 1997

Hi everyone,

Mum, Dad, and I were able to catch the Potterwatch broadcast last night. It's so sad what happened to Professor Ramsay's father: please pass along our condolences if you can, Rose. To those of you who couldn't tune in, the next broadcast will be on the 27th and the password is "Phoenix."

I've decided I'll combine your suggestions and make Mum a chocolate-covered strawberry mousse cake. I hope I'll be able to surprise her with it after her birthday dinner. Thank you so much for your advice!

You all are in my thoughts always. Please write soon, Bridget!

Kevin

Colin, thank you for passing along the password for Potterwatch. I'm glad Lee Jordan (or should I say "River?") thought to come up with such a thing – it'll be so much easier for everyone to stay informed, with both him and the Abraxans pitching in. I look very forward to hearing the next broadcast.

I confess I'm a bit conflicted about the news of Gordon Ramsay, Senior. I remember reading in Professor Ramsay's autobiography that he was kicked out of the house at age 16, and I have to wonder how much of that was his father's doing, but from what you were saying, it sounds like they at least mended fences enough that Ramsay Senior actually agreed to help Professor Ramsay get Muggle-borns out of harm's way. I guess this is just one more reminder to us all that we don't know how much time we have with our friends and family, and that we must try not to burn bridges if they are worth saving.

Stay safe, everyone – Bridget, you especially!

Regards,

Arjuna

August 12, 1997

Colin – it's good to hear you and your family were able to get out safely! I'm sorry about what happened to Mr. Ramsay, though; regardless of his previous actions, I'm sure he is still missed, and that's enough reason to feel sorry.

Ron – Thicknesse has completely reorganized how Ministry employees come in and out of work. The Floo Network is regulated so tightly now that almost no one can use it, so everyone has to Apparate or take the Knight Bus to London and then enter the Ministry through this set of restrooms next to the phone booth they use for the visitor's entrance. Then a Hit Wizard checks their new Ministry ID cards before they're allowed to enter. Father complained to Mother about the long lines one has to wait in during the early morning rush; he hates being in large crowds. We also overheard him say that Snape has been made Headmaster and that all witches and wizards between the ages of 11 and 17 are legally required to go to Hogwarts now, even if they were home-schooled in the past or parents were planning to home-school them this year...all families who don't comply could be charged with a crime! This disappointed Mother, who I think was wondering if she could keep Daphne and me from going back on September 1st...

We miss you all! Please be safe!

Astoria

I can't believe Snape's going to be Headmaster! I mean...he killed Dumbledore! How can they choose the man who killed the last Headmaster to take his place? I don't get it!

Professor Ramsay and his fiancée Tana stopped by briefly tonight while Beau, Trudy, Noel, and I were eating dinner (Mr. Malfoy's been keeping to himself, with Beau bringing him leftovers to eat in bed). Ramsay looked very pale and didn't say a word the entire visit; Tana mostly spoke for him. Whatever happened between him and his father, Ramsay's definitely having a hard time grieving him. I passed along your condolences, Kevin, and Tana thanked me. I think Ramsay was grateful too, even if he didn't say so.

I love you all!

xoxoxo

Rose

August 14, 1997

Hey guys, I found this Abraxan flier in the street while Dad and I were shopping in Diagon Alley

today! R.J. Moon really is marvelous – I'm so glad I was able to pocket this before anyone could notice. Read it and take comfort as I did...as R.J. Moon says, "courage is a blade that can be sharpened with the memory of sunshine and the desire to feel it on your face again!"

Love,

Hannah

August 15, 1997

Mum loved her birthday cake! Here's a picture I took of her and Dad – it was such a great sight, to see both of them smiling so big!

Kevin

August 16, 1997

Hey, guys!

Just got off work a little while ago, so I can finally tape in these pictures I took of our new neighborhood here in Glasgow. Our flat is a little bigger than our old one – Dennis and I actually have our own rooms, even if they're kind of small! We've always had to share, in the past...

I've started work as a kitchen assistant at this Muggle burger chain. Originally I was only supposed to work eight hours a day, five days a week, but it's quickly turned into six days with overtime, as not all the cooks are pulling their weight and the General Manager is kind of a loon. Not exactly living the dream, but I guess I can always keep my eyes open for a newspaper gig! And in the meantime, I am making pretty good change!

Here's one last picture of Dennis and me goofing off in the kitchen while making pancakes. We both couldn't stop laughing when we first looked at it, so hopefully it'll amuse you too!

Write soon, Bridget!

Cheers!

Colin

Hahaha! You two look like Slughorn, Bagnold, Ramsay, and Dumbledore after you soaked them with batter! I wish I could've been throwing batter right along with you – though I suppose if I'd been there, I would've creamed you both with ease!!

xoxoxo

Rose

August 18, 1997

Happy 13th birthday, Rose! I'm sorry we can't have a real party, but Dad and I made a small cake in your honor: here's a picture of it for you! We made sure to add pink roses just for you!

Love,

Hannah

Hi, Rose!

Dennis helped me make you something too! Just imagine pink-colored vanilla filling inside those strawberry cupcakes.

Cheers!

Colin

Rose,

I'm going to try to tape in my present so that you can take it out on your side. The bracelet you sent me was quite pretty, so I figured I could pick you up one in return in Diagon Alley today. (I pretended that I was buying it for myself, with the allowance money I saved up.) Astoria suggested that gold would suit you better than silver, and I had to agree.

Love from

Daphne (and Astoria)

Here's your present too, Rose! I used the pictures you've taped in of Mr. Whiskers as reference – I thought a proper portrait of him would make you smile!

Happy birthday!

Cho

Happy birthday, Rose!

Here's a pretty birthday card Dad and I were able to pick up in town for you...I told him about how you, Millicent, and Hannah were the "Unicorns," and as soon as we saw this, we knew it was just perfect for you! Hope you like it!

Kevin

Happy 13th, Rose.

MB

Happy birthday, Rose! I lament that we won't be able to celebrate properly, but take the time to imagine us there with you, singing loud and off-key birthday wishes. Don't forget to make a wish on your thirteen candles!

Regards,

Arjuna

Happy birthday, Rose! Sorry we can't get together for it, but I guess I'll just have to make you a cake the very next time I see you. Hopefully you'll be able to have a nice enough day, even if you're stuck in the same house as Lucius Malfoy...

Write when you can!

Ron

August 19, 1997

Thank you so much for the birthday wishes, you guys!! They really brightened my whole day. I made my own strawberry coconut birthday cake last night and shared it with Noel, Trudy, and Beau. Mr. Malfoy skipped out as usual, but he still hasn't been eating much of anything lately. Even when Beau brings food to his room, Mr. Malfoy barely eats any of it. Noel says he's being an arrogant snob, but Beau thinks it's more likely he's just depressed.

Cho, Mr. Whiskers loves his portrait, and Daphne, Astoria, thank you for the beautiful bracelet! I don't think I've ever seen anything so sparkly gold in my whole life! Ron, you owe me a raspberry and chocolate ice cream cake with pink frosting for my next birthday party!

Love you all so much – Bridget, you too!

xoxoxo

Rose

August 25, 1997

The Aurors injured three people while arresting a Muggle-born who was trying to access his

Gringotts account, so Mother made us stay at home while she picked up our required textbooks. I was a little concerned when I saw no book listed for Defense Against the Dark Arts, but I suppose at least it's not that pitiful book Umbridge assigned us.

It's hard to believe there's only one week left until Daphne and I return to Hogwarts. I wish I felt more of the usual excitement, but even that's been ruined, by this whole ordeal.

Love from

Astoria

Stori,

You have no idea how much I wish I could go with you. To be starting your OWL year, to learn Charms at the OWL level! Oh, how I wish I could ride the Hogwarts Express back to school with you, as we always have...

You all are in my thoughts always.

Arjuna

August 27, 1997

Did you all tune into the Potterwatch broadcast? It was so bloody great to hear Fred – I mean, “Rodent’s” voice! Haha! I hope he’ll be able to do a report for every broadcast: if nothing else, we could always use more updates about “old Morty’s” doings, right?

For those who couldn’t tune in, the next date will be the 5th of September and the next password is “Meadowes!”

Write soon, Bridget! We miss you.

Ron

It was nice to hear Fred letting loose, after seeing how much the Ministry has clamped down on Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. When I went in for a visit, I saw that they'd had to take out any and all references in their posters to phoenixes or Hogwarts and of course they had to take "U-No-Poo" off the shelves completely. Guess it just goes to show you that evil can't take a joke!

It'll be nice to see you on the Hogwarts Express, Millicent, Daphne, and Astoria. Maybe if we're careful, we'll be able to meet up in the kitchens that night, after the feast?

Miss you all,

Hannah

Hannah –

That sounds lovely. Let's give it a go.

Everyone, please be safe. Bridget, you're in our thoughts and prayers always.

Love from

Daphne

August 28, 1997

Five more arrests today, including Penelope Smith-Clearwater, her husband Thaddeus, and their two-year-old son William. No idea yet what the Ministry plans to do with the child...

MB

August 30, 1997

The Abraxans were able to track down more information about the Smith-Clearwaters: here's their

most recent flier. The Ministry has sequestered William Smith-Clearwater away from his parents while they're awaiting trial, claiming they'll release the boy to relatives if the Smith-Clearwaters are cleared of the charges leveled against them, but as the charges against Penelope involve "stealing magic from a witch or wizard," there's no way she could ever be acquitted! It's monstrous!!

Hannah

*That's ridiculous! To say something like that when they know there's no way they'd ever do it – it's disgusting! It's vile! It's... **ARGH!***

Colin

As if you need more reason to loathe the Death Eaters, they pull crap like this! I don't even want to imagine what they might be doing to that little boy...and I can't imagine his parents are doing so well, being separated from him either.

Ron

I know! My heart is broken for all of them! To think of Penelope in such dire straits, separated from her family – it's just awful! We must keep them in our prayers, whenever possible...

Love,

Cho

Oh Hannah, that is just terrible news! I feel so awful for their whole family...what a cruel, spiteful, heartless thing to do, putting them through something like that!!

Astoria

August 31, 1997

At long last, I've finally perfected my baking project for the month: a Hogwarts-shaped ginger cake with gray-colored white chocolate filling. It took me a while to get the carving techniques just right, but I couldn't be happier with the result! My next project will be a phoenix, with individually carved feathers!

Best of luck to all of you going back to school tomorrow! Wish I could be there with you, but at least you'll have each other, Astoria, Daphne, Millicent, and Hannah...

Kevin

Kevin, your cake is beautiful! Your carving is truly wonderful; every window and tower is just right! Wish you could be with us at school too.

Love from

Astoria

Your details are exquisite, Kevin. You shaded every turret expertly, creating such gorgeous dimension and weight to every tower. You certainly deserve to be proud of your work!

Love,

Daphne

OH MY GOD, KEVIN, YOUR CAKE LOOKS AWESOME!!

xoxoxo

Rose

Whoa, Kevin! Your cake looks so cool! My mouth is watering just looking at it!!

Cheers!

Colin

Kevin, what a wonderful cake! Even if I were right there with you, I don't think I could bear to eat any of it, as I wouldn't want to demolish such a work of art!

Love,

Cho

Impressive.

MB

Kevin, your cake is brilliant! I can't even imagine how much work you must have put into that to make it look that good. I wish I could send this picture to my mum: I'm just imagining her screaming in delight seeing it!

Don't let the world get you down, guys! Bridget, please write soon!

Ron

September 1, 1997

Hannah,

Kindly escort Astoria while we're on the Hogwarts Express today. She might say she's fine (she might even claim she is through the written word), but I would feel more comfortable if she were sitting with a friend. I would have her sit with me, but I fear Pansy might demand my attention, and I would not force Astoria to listen to her more offensive opinions.

Much obliged.

Daphne

Creak.

Rose looked up from her Kransimir scrapbook lying on the dining room table, startled. At first she had worried that someone had entered the house without her realizing it and she'd left herself exposed in a public space. Fortunately, when she looked up, she only found Lucius Malfoy, dressed in black silk pants and a matching smoking jacket and walking a bit precariously on his prosthetic leg.

When Lucius caught sight of Rose, the expression on his waxen, gaunt face turned noticeably irritated. Then he purposefully walked around the table, looking around the kitchen.

"Hi, Mr. Malfoy," Rose greeted brightly.

Lucius gave a low snort under his breath, but otherwise ignored her. His gaze drifted over the kitchen cabinets and countertops rather than focusing on her.

"Are you looking for something?" Rose asked kindly after a moment.

If Lucius heard her, he didn't act like it. He pulled open a few of the lower cabinets around the sink, closing each sharply in turn upon seeing their contents.

Rose got up from the table, closing her scrapbook shut, and moved around the table to stand just behind the older man.

"Can I help you find what you're looking for?"

Lucius's upper lip curled unpleasantly, but this time he did vocally acknowledge her.

"Not unless you know where the alcohol is stored," he said coldly.

Rose smiled wryly. "Yeah – but Beau keeps it locked."

She skipped over to the pantry, pointing to the little silver lock on the door. Lucius snorted.

"That will be of no consequence," he said, drawing his black elm wand from the pocket of his smoking jacket with his leather and iron hand.

With some difficulty, he waved his wand at the lock. It took him a few tries to get the wrist movements just right, but within a minute, the lock clicked open and Lucius opened the pantry door.

"Pouring wine into your oatmeal this morning?" teased Rose, grinning amusedly.

Lucius came out holding a short bottle of whiskey, which he opened by popping the cork out with his teeth. Spitting the cork into the sink, he then drank the whiskey right out of the bottle. The image of this supposedly sophisticated gentleman downing a bottle of cheap whiskey was enough to make Rose laugh fully.

"Well, at least you're taking in *something*, I guess," she said lightly, as she strolled over to the fridge. "Beau said you've barely eaten anything in the last few weeks."

Lucius lowered the whiskey bottle, his eyes narrowing upon the little brunette as she took out a block of Roquefort cheese and two pears and put them down on the dining table.

“There!” she said brightly, as she took two small plates out of the cupboard and put them down at two places on the table. “Those should go nicely with whiskey...I’ve never really drank it myself before, but Cho and Daphne taught me a little about what flavors go with different kinds of alcohol...”

Lucius looked over the cheese and pears suspiciously; Rose started cutting them into pieces and putting servings on each plate.

“I never said I was hungry,” he said coldly.

“I know,” Rose replied brightly without looking up.

Once she was done cutting up the first pear and slicing off a portion of cheese, Rose put both on the plate and slid it across the table in Lucius’s direction.

“There you go!”

Lucius’s nose wrinkled as he stared down at the cheese and pear, dumbfounded. Rose ignored his reaction, cutting herself some pear and cheese slices too.

“Today your son’s probably going off to school, right?” she asked.

Lucius’s eyes flickered upon her, the gray a weird mixture of disgust, irritation, and pain.

“Apparently all witches and wizards between 11 and 17 have to go this year,” Rose continued absently, “and your son’s 17, so I guess he’d be there...”

“Draco is now a servant of the Dark Lord.”

Rose looked up, surprised. Lucius had turned away, making his expression impossible to see, and his voice was forcibly steady.

“He’s no longer a student,” Lucius said lowly. “No Hogwarts Headmaster would allow him to re-enter the school, while knowing his allegiance.”

Rose frowned. “I reckon Snape might – he’s a Death Eater too, isn’t he?”

Lucius stiffened visibly.

“...Severus?” he said in a strange voice.

“Yeah,” said Rose, her voice touched with slight sourness. “Thicknesse appointed him...though of course it probably wasn’t *really* his decision.”

Lucius was silent, clearly taking this new information in. Rose took a bite of her pear before speaking again.

“...It’ll probably be easy for your son this year, if his old Head of House is his Headmaster. Maybe he’ll be able to play Quidditch again – the Slytherin team really wasn’t the same without him last year.”

Out the corner of her eye, Rose actually caught the slightest hint of a smirk touching Lucius’s face.

“Of course it wasn’t,” he said coolly. “Draco has always been the most talented player.”

Rose smiled. “He *is* awful good. He must’ve worked really hard to get that good – Noel’s worked really hard to get where they are too, even if they don’t like admitting it...did you fly at school too, Mr. Malfoy?”

Lucius turned to look at Rose suspiciously.

“What do you want?” he asked.

Rose blinked. “Hmm?”

“What is your aim in trying to get me to *converse* with you, hmm? You are a Muggle-bred bantling, barely above Muggles, which are just barely above animals. What reason could I *possibly* have to bless a leech like you – something that drains magic from the world and drags all of wizard kind down with you – any sort of attention?”

The vitriol Lucius spoke with was potent and sickening. Amazingly, however, Rose was unfazed; instead she merely raised her eyebrows, surveying Lucius innocuously.

“Don’t really have an *aim*, exactly...except maybe hoping you’ll relax enough to finally eat something. As for reason...well, you’re clearly malnourished, and you’re looking kind of frail...and why *wouldn’t* you be, you haven’t eaten anything substantial in weeks! I reckon your family wouldn’t like seeing you like this, if nothing else.”

Lucius stared at Rose, dumbfounded. He clearly had expected her to get angry – to shut down – but instead, all the tiny Hufflepuff did was push the plate full of pear slices and cheese a little closer to him.

“If you don’t want to talk, that’s fine,” she said coolly, eating a little more cheese herself, “but you’ll have to eat to get me to shut up.”

Lucius looked from the plate to up at her again, his gray eyes narrowing critically. Then, very, very slowly, he put the bottle of whiskey down on the table, lowered himself down into the chair in front of the plate, and took a bite of the cheese.

The two ate in silence for about five minutes. When Lucius was just finishing his third pear slice, he broke the silence.

“...I didn’t fly at school. But my wife did.”

Rose’s eyes lit up. “She did?”

“Yes.”

“Was she a Seeker too? Like your son?”

“Yes.”

“Wow...” Rose whispered softly, enchanted. “That’s so cool, that your son carried on the tradition like that!”

Lucius didn’t speak again, but his face was noticeably relaxed compared to how it had been when he’d first entered the kitchen.

September 1st

The first of September, as long as Astoria could remember, had always been a very exciting day. As their parents escorted her and Daphne to Platform 9 ¾, however, the younger Greengrass felt nothing but apprehension, and she wasn't the only one. Almost all of the parents saying goodbye to their students outside the Hogwarts Express looked white-faced and anxious. The platform also seemed oddly sparse compared to years past – Astoria could barely make out any students who looked like first years in the sea of children and families.

“There's almost no one here,” Astoria murmured to Daphne under her breath.

“Considering how many students are either in hiding or were arrested, I guess we shouldn't be surprised,” said Daphne just as quietly.

Astoria nodded. Even just in the fourth year Ravenclaw girl's dorm, she figured the only other person who might be back that year was Hilary Erskine; the other two, Francine Bigelow and Orla Quirke, had Muggles in their family, and of course Arjuna had already gone into hiding. If every other dorm was like that, then it was likely the student body would be a pitiable fraction of what it used to be...

Daphne glanced around at the families surrounding them. At one point her dark eyes landed on a man who was trying to gently pry his crying wife off of their second-year son, and she couldn't keep her jaw from clenching.

‘That woman knows she's sending her son to the wolves,’ Daphne thought to herself gloomily. ‘She knows the danger – yet they know that if he doesn't go, then the wolves will devour all three of them.’

The Greengrasses approached the train together. Mr. Greengrass lifted his daughters' trunks on board before he turned to them solemnly.

“Daphne...Astoria,” he said slowly. His posture was very straight, almost painfully so. “I expect you both to stay out of trouble – mind your professors, stay in line – and don't –”

He couldn't fight back a choke as his dark eyes rested on Astoria. It cracked his flawless, resolute shell, which clearly upset him, as he forced his emotions down quickly, narrowing his eyes to create an almost fierce expression.

“...Don’t play the hero,” he said very coldly, his gaze boring into Astoria.

Astoria’s light blue eyes narrowed. She remembered what Daphne had said, way back when, about how her parents cared about her; she remembered Mr. Greengrass saying he would always put her safety first. This was why he sounded so cruel now – because he had no idea how to express his fears in a healthy way. He hadn’t had a best friend like Arjuna, or a mentor like Hyperion, or supportive teachers like Flitwick or Ramsay, or cooking companions like Kevin, Ron, Hannah, and the others. All he’d ever had was their mother, Theia, and she was just as clueless about how to express herself as he was.

“Yes, Father,” Daphne said softly.

Astoria turned to find her sister giving her a mutedly encouraging look.

‘Father never even had a sister like Daphne,’ Astoria thought, her eyes softening slightly.

Feeling a rush of compassion and being the black sheep that she was, Astoria did not simply clamp down her feelings and hide them away. Instead she gently put down her owl Wagtail’s cage and moved forward, extending her arms as she did so, and quickly wrapped her arms around both of her parents in a huge hug. Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass stiffened sharply, so taken aback it was almost like they were revolted.

“I’ll be careful,” Astoria said very quietly, but very firmly. “I promise.”

When she withdrew, her parents looked quite a bit paler and speechless, to the point they resembled lost children. Deciding quickly it was best not to let her parents stew in their discomfort, Astoria picked up Wagtail’s cage again and climbed onto the train. Daphne climbed on behind her, waving goodbye to their parents before sneaking Astoria a covert, amused smirk out of their view.

“Hannah will meet you in a compartment five down from here, on the left,” Daphne murmured to her sister. “I’ll have to go look for Pansy...”

Astoria frowned. “Daphne, don’t bother with her – just come with me, Hannah would love to see you – ”

Daphne shook her head as she shifted her trunk around in the opposite direction, moving her owl Beaumont's cage to her other hand in the movement.

"I'm Pansy's friend, Astoria," she said lowly. "While the word is used loosely, I can't throw it out, at least for one more year. But I needn't force you to go through the motions I have to. Don't worry...I'll see you tonight, in the kitchens."

She gave Astoria a very small smile and then started rolling up off the train corridor, Beaumont at her side and her trunk behind her.

Daphne passed several other students in the hallway, including Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood, before a compartment opened up beside her.

"Daphne! There you are!"

It was Pansy. Daphne put on her most sophisticatedly pleasant expression.

"Pansy," she greeted coolly.

Pansy immediately came out of the compartment. Winding both of her arms around Daphne's right one as tightly as a Devil's Snare, she led Daphne into the compartment, where Millicent and Blaise Zabini were already sitting. Millicent and Daphne exchanged the briefest of nods.

"Good summer?" Pansy asked offhandedly.

The memory of Kevin's letter about Owen's death and Rose's about Bridget's disappearance rippled through Daphne's mind.

"A bit muggy for my taste," Daphne sniffed coolly. "And Twilfit and Tatting's most recent robe line is ridiculously gaudy."

"Really," said Pansy, though she sounded perfectly disinterested.

Daphne recognized the tone of voice as her making conversation just for the sake of formality, and sure enough, Pansy immediately changed the subject a moment later once she'd closed the compartment door.

“So apparently,” she whispered almost conspiratorially to the others, “thanks to the school’s new *leadership*, there’ll be a few *changes* this year.”

Daphne raised her eyebrows, trying to hide the apprehension she was feeling.

“Oh?”

Zabini smirked. “The staff has been filtered out too, just like the students. Only the best witches and wizards from the best families will be back this year, meaning no more Mudblood Ramsays.”

This didn’t surprise Daphne – she’d already assumed, given Snape’s new position, that he would *never* have rehired Ramsay. Besides, Ramsay had a lot of people in hiding whom he needed to protect. There was no way he could’ve kept that secret from an accomplished Legilimens like Snape.

“Do we know who’ll be taking on Potions?” asked Daphne. “I doubt Snape would want to split his Headmaster duties with classes.”

Zabini shrugged nonchalantly. “Who knows? They’ll be decent enough, I expect.”

“Never mind about that,” said Pansy, “let me tell you what Mother told me yesterday.”

She sounded almost giddy, as if she were merely sharing a piece of gossip about the hottest member of a band.

“The Senior Undersecretary – Etienne Montmercy – is looking into bringing back these old Magical Progeny guidelines, which would take effect for every seventh year Hogwarts student before they graduate. Back in the day, during the Dark Ages, the guidelines were drafted to help witches and wizards connect with each other and continue the bloodlines of magical families, back before we had places like Diagon Alley and Hogwarts where we could gather freely.”

Millicent looked up at Pansy, suddenly interested. Daphne's eyebrows furrowed slightly despite herself.

"Wait," she said slowly, "so they're basically –"

"Arranged pureblood marriages, officially sanctioned by the Ministry," finished Pansy. Amazingly she didn't seem the least bit distressed; instead she looked almost pleased. "Montmercy plans to make an announcement about it sometime tonight, though of course given that he'd only be able to speak for *our* Ministry, the regulation could only encompass *British* witches and wizards. Mother's one of Montmercy's aids, so he told her that his *daughter*," she gave a quiet cough, "will set a proper example for the protocol, by announcing her engagement."

"*Julien*?" Daphne said, startled. "I thought he wanted nothing to do with his father –"

Zabini snorted. "Be reasonable, Daphne. If your father was one of the most powerful men in the Ministry, would *you* oppose his will?"

Daphne's dark eyes narrowed ever so slightly as she considered this.

*'Julien would **never** have agreed to such an engagement,' she thought. 'He may be no hothead Gryffindor, but he's too proud to just sit back and do nothing. And he **hates** his father and his beliefs.'*

"Anyway, I've already written to Mother telling her *my* wishes, regarding my placement," Pansy said coolly. "I'd say you should inform your parents sooner rather than later too, before the Ministry starts pairing you off willy-nilly."

Daphne tried to keep her concern from her face as her gaze fell to the silver promise ring on her right hand.

Arranged marriages – not even made by her family, but by the *Ministry*? She'd never *considered* such a thing! And if the legislation could only match up *British* witches and wizards, then that would mean that she and Rudolf –

Fortunately Pansy was distracted away from Daphne by another figure moving past the window of their compartment. Her black eyes lighting up, she immediately shot to her feet and yanked the

door open again.

“*Draco!*”

Both Daphne and Millicent straightened up sharply. Draco stopped in his tracks as Pansy immediately brought both of her arms around him, hugging him tightly.

“Oh, I was *hoping* the Ministry’s new requirement meant that you’d be back this year!” said Pansy, her voice oddly affectionate.

Draco looked startled. His face had flushed a very light pink and his gray eyes appeared very confused.

“What – ” he looked down at the back of Pansy’s head, since she was wrapped so tightly around him he couldn’t see her face. “What are you...*doing?*”

“What does it *look* like I’m doing?” Pansy said coolly. “I’m hugging you.”

“But – ” said Draco, “you – I – you said you were *done* with me – ”

Pansy pulled away, her expression oddly gentle.

“I know what I said,” she said, her tone rather serious, “but...Draco, I was angry. I was angry and I didn’t understand what you were going through. But I get it now, Draco. I get it.”

Zabini snorted derisively.

“Goodie,” he said sarcastically. “At least *one* of us does.”

Pansy shot Zabini a cold look over her shoulder. “Shut your trap.”

She turned back to Draco, her expression much more gentle.

“The responsibility was weighing on you, and I couldn’t *support* you because you couldn’t tell me,” she said, her tone forceful through its romanticism. “Well, now I *know* the truth – how you tried to force me away, tried to protect me from the danger of your mission – the pain you’ve gone through, holding all of your feelings in and trying to be strong – losing your father, after having only just seeing him freed! What you’ve gone through – it’s no *wonder* you shut yourself off, denied yourself and your feelings...”

Zabini frowned slightly. “Wha – oh Pansy, come on now, are you for real?”

“I’ve never *been* more real,” Pansy growled back fiercely over her shoulder, as she brought a hand through Draco’s light blond hair. “I don’t care what the Dark Lord thinks, or what the Ministry thinks. He’s still my Draco, the boy I love, even despite everything – ” She turned back to Draco, “– and I will never, *never* abandon you.”

Zabini’s nose wrinkled in disdain. Draco’s eyes moved over Pansy’s face, scanning it. Daphne had difficulty deciphering what his emotional state was, but she suspected it was murky at best. After a moment, Draco brought an arm around Pansy, yanking her close to his side as he gave a low scoff.

“You could’ve just said you changed your mind,” he said dully.

Draco’s attempt at his old, uncaring self came across pretty hollowly to Daphne. It sounded *disinterested*, yes, but there was none of the normal energy, none of the disdainful mockery, none of the petty vindictiveness. It was less like his usual obnoxious, animated persona and more like the air Mr. Greengrass would put off at dinner parties: condescending, distant, and hiding a million emotions at once.

Pansy, however, seemed perfectly content with Draco’s response; she coaxed him to sit down next to her and rest his head in her lap the way they used to. Draco’s gray eyes drifted to the floor, almost looking right through it.

Daphne sneaked a glance at Millicent, whose brown eyes appeared similarly critical.

‘He doesn’t feel a thing for her,’ Daphne thought to herself. ‘He just doesn’t want to be alone again...probably doesn’t know how to. And perhaps, deep down, he wants everything to be as it was...that he could be the arrogant prat he was before.’

Daphne distracted herself with levitating everyone's trunks and Beaumont's cage into the overhead luggage racks. She *really* didn't want to think about how sorry she felt for Pansy in that moment. Yes, she was a romantic fool, to conjure up such an image of her and Draco's past and future...but Draco, it seemed, had no concept of just how much his selfishness might hurt her.

That evening, far away from the Hogwarts Express and the magical school that was its destination, a beat-up white Oldsmobile pulled up in a suburban neighborhood in Wandsworth Common, just outside a row of houses with neatly trimmed hedges.

Once the car parked next to the sidewalk, the back door opened, and a young, dark-skinned teenage girl with her black hair tied in a tight ballerina-like bun and dressed in an oversized red T-shirt and jeans stepped out. Once she closed the door behind her, she moved up to the open car window, looking through at the two Muggle men sitting in the front – the driver, Ramin, and his boyfriend, Jeff.

"Are you going to be okay from here?" asked Jeff concernedly. He was a rather heavy-set, ginger-haired man with murky green eyes and a round, boyish face.

Bridget nodded with a confident, white smile. "Yeah – I'll be okay."

"Do you want us to come up there with you?" asked Jeff. "Make sure your teacher will be okay with you staying with him?"

"No," Bridget said quickly. Remembering immediately she needed to keep up her cover (namely, that she was just a runaway, rather than a witch hiding from the Death-Eater-conquered Ministry of Magic), she added, "No, I – I'll be all right."

Jeff glanced at his boyfriend worriedly. Ramin – a tanned, dark-haired man with piercings in his left ear, lip, and eyebrow – reached out and took a firm hold of Bridget's arm.

"I get it if you don't want us coming with you to the door," said Ramin sympathetically. "After all, I know we don't *blend in* particularly." He eyed the clean-cut, conservative houses. "But just know that we'll be waiting out here for fifteen minutes. If you need to run right back, do so – okay?"

Bridget smiled a little more gently at Ramin.

“...Thank you,” she said. “Both of you...I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to repay you – letting me stay, giving me a ride...and all while you don’t even know me.”

Jeff beamed at Bridget. “Hey, I know what it’s like, having nowhere to go – no friends in your corner – no way in Hell was I gonna turn away from someone else stuck sleeping on the street!”

He reached down, picking up a grocery bag and handing it to Bridget.

“Here’s some snacks,” he said kindly, “and some fresh clothes too – I had to guess on sizing, but I figured at least that way your teacher won’t have to pitch in to buy you anything...and at least it’ll fit you better than Ramin’s old stuff...”

Bridget took the bag from Jeff, looking visibly overwhelmed. Her black eyes full of emotion, she reached forward and squeezed his hand tightly.

“Thank you,” she said again, very quietly.

Jeff clutched Bridget’s hand just as tightly in return. Then both he and Ramin released Bridget, and she darted up to the house.

According to the phone book, this was Gordon Ramsay’s address. Bridget took a deep breath, her hand gripping the handle of her wand hidden inside the pocket of her oversized jeans, and approached the front door. Sliding the grocery bag down her arm, she raised her fist and knocked.

There was a slight pause. Then, after a moment, a female voice called, “Come in!”

Feeling faintly uneasy, Bridget nonetheless opened the door and slowly walked inside. The entrance hall was rather pretty, with a simple red throw rug and a staircase with a pretty wood banister. At the top of the staircase was a brown-haired woman dressed in robes. She stared at Bridget for a moment warily, her eyes darting to the open door behind her and then up at her face.

“Identify yourself,” she said sharply.

Seeing the woman's distrustful expression, Bridget slowly offered her best attempt at a smile.

"I'm Bridget Jaheem...I'm looking f – "

Before she could say anything else, the woman raised her wand. The front door closed sharply behind Bridget and a flash of white mist shot forward, winding itself like a rope around her and yanked her forward, right off her feet.

"*AHH!*"

The grocery bag went flying, chucking clothes and a box of crackers and biscuits into the air, as Bridget was abruptly slammed onto the floor face-first, bound in white magical ropes that locked her arms to her sides and bound her legs together. She tried desperately to reach her wand, but her hands were trapped.

The dark-haired woman stepped forward, leering down at the young witch as a few other figures appeared just behind her. Now that Bridget could see the woman better, she recognized her scarlet Auror robes.

"So it seems we were right to suspect Gordon Ramsay of hiding fugitives," the Auror said coolly, her blue eyes narrowed. "It's just unfortunate he relocated before we could arrest him properly... but perhaps if we linger around here a little longer, we'll grab a few more *rats* slinking out of the sewers, looking for help..."

One of the other Aurors – an older-looking man with thick sunglasses hiding his eyes – bent down, lifting Bridget up in a feat of almost inhuman strength.

"Should we initiate an interrogation?" he asked the female Auror without fully turning to look at her. "Might be appropriate, given the circumstances..."

Bridget's black eyes flared with righteous fury. Seeing the defiance in her gaze, the female Auror shook her head.

"No – we're not equipped to interrogate her properly here. Best just to let the courts handle it..."

perhaps she'll feel a prickling of her conscience, when she's facing Madame Umbridge's prosecution..."

Thirty minutes after Bridget first entered the Ramsay home, the beat-up white Oldsmobile drove away, back toward London.

Because the Aurors used Side-Along Apparition to take Bridget from the house, Ramin and Jeff never saw any of them leave and so had no inkling of just how much danger the young girl was in.

The Hearing

Bridget was assigned to a holding cell in Azkaban overnight. It was easily the most hopeless and terrifying night of her life – she couldn't sleep a wink, thanks to the many echoes of "*Mudblood*" and "*Lesbo*" shouted in her ears from all sides and her old friend Lila standing over her the entire time like a mile-high shadow.

The next morning an Auror in scarlet robes arrived to escort Bridget to the Ministry.

"It's time to go."

Bridget looked up in surprise.

The Auror was young with blond hair and ice blue eyes, and he wore blue eye shadow and pale pink lip-gloss that looked unnatural and unattractive against his skin. His eyes and expression, however dignified, pulsed with regret.

"...*Julien*?" whispered Bridget.

Julien Montmercy attempted a smile, but it only looked like a grimace. He bent down, took hold of Bridget's arm, and lifted her onto her feet. Once she was standing, he raised his wand, pointing it at her wrists and binding them with magical white chains that lashed them together in front of her.

"Your hearing will be in Courtroom 3," Julien said under his breath. "I'll need to use Side-Along Apparition, so don't squirm. I'd hate for you to Splinch an arm."

Julien appeared with Bridget in one of the Ministry's Floo Network fireplaces, striding right onto the floor so briskly that Bridget had to skip to catch up.

"The only place you can Apparate into the Ministry now is through one of those," he explained to her under his breath, when he noticed her confused glance back at the fireplace they'd entered through. "That way you have to go through security like everyone else."

Bridget looked ahead, to see a whole line of witches and wizards in different colored robes lining up in front of several tables, showing little purple cards and being scrutinized by a series of Mastiffs, who were all dressed in obnoxious pink.

'Wonder if Umbridge assigned them that color,' Bridget thought sardonically.

Julien joined the line, keeping a vice grip on Bridget's arm as he fetched a folded piece of parchment and his own purple card from the inside of his robes. Bridget could see the card had a moving black and white picture of him on the left side and a lot of tiny words and a large red Auror Department stamp on the right. They stood in line in silence for about a minute; then, just as they were reaching the halfway point, they heard someone call,

"Lydia!"

Julien winced visibly as a man around Goodfellow's age strode up to them. He was on the smaller side with disheveled curly brown hair, a chiseled jaw with an oddly pointy chin, and eyes as murky blue as still pond water. He was dressed in burnt orange dress robes with a high collar he'd left messily unbuttoned.

The young man strode right up to Julien, bringing an arm around his waist and yanking him back against his chest.

"There you are, darling," he said affectionately, "I was hoping I'd catch you this morning."

"Let go of me, Uric," Julien muttered under his breath, his voice torn between dignity and utter hatred.

Bridget gave a start. Uric – as in *Uric Cuffe*, the creator of the *Stormer*?

Cuffe, perfectly ignorant of Julien's discomfort, gave him a smile worthy of a weasel and led him in a perfect strut around the lines. Julien held tightly onto Bridget, who was forced to follow them.

"My fiancée and I have urgent business to attend to with her father," Cuffe told the Mastiff at one of the front tables arrogantly when he tried to stop them, "Etienne Montmercy, you know? Senior

Undersecretary to the Minister?”

The Mastiff immediately lowered his arm and closed his mouth, giving a submissive nod. Cuffe strode right past him, carrying Julien and Bridget along with him.

“There you are, my dear,” Cuffe said coolly. “No sense in you wasting your time waiting in line like *normal* people...”

He trailed a hand along Julien’s hip. His pale face visibly disgusted, Julien wrenched himself out of Cuffe’s hold.

“Do *not* touch me,” he snarled, and he very quickly walked away, dragging Bridget along after him.

“Lydia!” said Cuffe, his voice almost lackadaisical as he pursued her. “Come on now, Lydia, don’t be like that – I was only *helping*!”

“I don’t need your help!” Julien shot back coldly without turning around.

“When your father assigned you to me, he told me to look *after* you,” Cuffe said, inching toward a singsong pitch that felt like nails on a chalkboard to Bridget. “Is that not what a husband should do for his wife – just as a wife should love and honor her husband – ?”

Julien wrenched Bridget into the lift at the end of the hall and quickly shut the cage behind them before Cuffe could follow them into it.

“You,” he snarled venomously, smacking one of the buttons on the side of the lift with his fist, “are *not* my husband.”

Cuffe’s murky blue eyes twinkled, but it only served to make his gaze more unpleasant.

“Of course not,” he said coolly. His voice then grew much softer and almost sinister around what he clearly thought was a dashing smile, “...Not yet.”

The lift descended, and in a flash of black, Uric Cuffe was out of view.

Bridget glanced at Julien. He looked visibly ill.

“Julien –” she started, but he cut her off sharply.

“Father has started pairing us off. Purebloods, I mean. He claims that it’s out of love – that he’s providing for his ‘*daughter*’ by arranging a place for me in one of the Wizarding World’s most respected families. He even tried to tell my mother that it’s his way of making up for all of the years he lost with us while he was in Azkaban – though, of course, Mum knows he’s full of it.”

Julien’s ice blue eyes flared with hatred.

“The same policy will be going into effect at Hogwarts soon enough...he’s just using Uric and me as a *glowing* example of how well such matches can turn out.”

Bridget couldn’t completely fight back a snort. She immediately felt guilty, but Julien actually seemed comforted by her amusement, and he smiled ever so slightly at her. Then his eyes turned much more despondent as they fell to the floor.

“...Now that I’m in this mess, there’s no way I can properly out myself,” he said quietly. “I’d planned to tell Mum about who I am – about the name I’ve chosen for myself, about...how I’ve always been...but now that Father is out of Azkaban and has been made Senior Undersecretary, she’s had to bow to his will...and so have I.”

Bridget looked at Julien, her black eyes filled with pity. She had seen him as a boy so long that his dead name “*Lydia*” sounded foreign to her ears, but he’d still had to answer to it while he was at home and when he was dealing with teachers. It seemed like his graduation must have been such a beacon of hope, as it would finally mean he could live on his own and be his own man...but now there was no way he could ever escape the shadow of his father’s influence. And knowing Julien, that knowledge had to be killing him.

The lift opened, to reveal a long, dark hall full of black zircon doors with silver doorknobs. Julien led Bridget down the hallway by her arm, down toward the very end. It was unnaturally cold underground, and as they came down the stairs, Bridget realized why.

A large group of black-robed dementors dominated the space, crowded around a line of Muggle-borns waiting on an assortment of short wooden benches set up along the wall. They were all shaking, both from cold and terror.

As Julien approached, the dementors looked up. Bridget shuddered as they glided a little closer, letting out a rattling breath as their gaze fell on her.

“A lesbo,” Lila’s face and voice clouded Bridget’s mind’s eye. *“That means she’s sick in the head – ”*

Bridget’s jaw clenched as she tried to block it out. Julien raised his wand.

“Expecto Patronum,” he said, his eyes very cold upon the dementors.

In an instant a silvery white peacock floated out of his wand, striding in front of him and unfolding its feathers like a shield. The dementors floated back to their old position, letting out irritated yowls at having been denied such a tasty meal.

A pink-dressed witch with curly orange-blond hair at the front of the line came to greet Julien. The silvery shadow of a magpie Patronus was perched on her shoulder, illuminating the traces of reddish pimples dusted over her nose. It was Marietta Edgecombe.

“Julien – ” she started, but before she could say anything else, the courtroom door opened.

A pair of dementors dragged a wizard from the room in their gnarled, rotted hands. He was around Goodfellow’s age, with a tear-streaked boyish face and glasses.

“MY WIFE!” he screamed desperately. “MY SON! YOU CAN’T – MY FAMILY – !”

“Resist further,” the girlish, high-pitched voice of Dolores Umbridge rang out unnaturally loud from inside the room, “and you will be subjected to the Dementors’ Kiss.”

Another older man watched them leave from the open courtroom doorway. Bridget realized with a horrible fright that she knew this last figure – he was the same hard-faced Death Eater who’d tried to capture her back at Lottie’s.

The hard-faced man’s dark eyes flickered coldly as he turned to leer at the Muggle-borns in line. When he’d turned his face toward them, Bridget could see the slightest traces of a flame-like scar over his left eye – as if he’d been burned badly by something that had collided with his face.

“Next,” the hard-faced man barked at Marietta.

Marietta flinched, and the magpie on her shoulder flickered. Keeping her composure as best she could, she looked at the clipboard in her hands and turned to a fair-haired witch sitting on a bench a yard away, whose white hands clutched at the front of her robes anxiously.

“Georgia Copper, Mr. Yaxley,” Marietta said solemnly.

She was unable to look the witch in the eye as Yaxley raised his wand and the woman’s magical white chains yanked her off of her seat and into the courtroom. The door shut behind both of them, leaving the hallway once again horribly silent and cold.

The silvery magpie flickered and died, disappearing in a puff of smoke as Marietta dropped her clipboard and hung her head, covering her face in her hands. The dementors immediately swooped forward toward the now-unprotected Ministry employee, gasping hungrily.

Julien released Bridget’s arm, shooting a sharp look at her. “Sit down and don’t move.”

Raising his wand, he walked quickly over to Marietta, guiding his peacock Patronus in front of them to drive off the ravenous dementors. Once they had backed off, Julien picked the clipboard up off the ground, turned to Marietta, and brought a hand down on her shoulder. Bridget couldn’t make out what he was saying to her, but she guessed it had to be some sort of comfort. Marietta wiped some tears from her eye as she looked up at him.

“He’s a *father*,” Bridget could just barely make out. “Even if he *were* a threat to Ministry security, how can *anyone* separate a parent from their child? I can’t – ”

Julien murmured something else to her, squeezing her shoulder tightly as he gave the clipboard

back to her. Finally, after a moment, Marietta swallowed and then took a deep breath.

“...*Expecto Patronum*,” she whispered.

A silver mist floated out of her wand and melded into the shape of a magpie, which flew around Marietta’s head like a halo once before settling itself back down onto her shoulder.

Julien turned to the Muggle-borns on the benches, his ice blue eyes oddly hard as if silently condemning them for trying to listen in, before he strolled to the other side of the benches, stopping just behind Bridget with his Patronus at his side. She tried to make eye contact with him again, but he looked just as disturbed as Marietta and avoided her gaze.

The minutes dragged on as one by one, the Muggle-borns were summoned into the courtroom and then dragged out crying, screaming, or just numb with shock and terror by the dementors. Eventually more Aurors and Mastiff agents arrived to drop off their charges, though unlike Julien they chose to move on to their next assignment rather than stay with Marietta and the prisoners.

At one point, about an hour after she had first arrived, Bridget glanced at the man who had sat down next to her – an older man with a receding hairline, who put on a brave face despite his frail, shaking hands. When the man made eye contact with her, his sickly pale face lit up in recognition.

“You’re B-Bridget Jaheem...aren’t you?” he asked.

Bridget was startled. “...Yeah.”

The man gave a weak toothy smile, failing to fight back a shiver. “I remember you from the *Prophet*’s MagicChef articles. Loved that – that croqembouche tower you lot made...r-reminded me of the good old days...when my dear old mum owned a bakery...”

Despite herself Bridget couldn’t help but smile a little. “Thanks.”

The man gave a great shudder when a dementor leaned in toward him, tempted by the flicker of nostalgic happiness. Bridget suddenly thought she saw Pansy Parkinson’s sneering face peaking

out from under the black hood, but it was such a frenzied flash that it could've just been her imagination.

"...Name's Albert Alderton," said the man, once he'd recovered himself. "House Hufflepuff, in my youth – I'd shake your hand, but...well..."

He lifted his bound hands sheepishly.

"It's nice to meet you," Bridget said lightly. "Even under...*these* circumstances."

She indicated the dementors around them with a nod of her head. Alderton smiled fully.

Barely a second later, the courtroom door opened, and the crying form of Paige Edwards was dragged from the room. The hard-faced man called Yaxley had reappeared in the doorway, his eyes flashing at Marietta.

"Next!"

Marietta looked down at her clipboard and then up at Bridget, her eyes rippling with conflict. Before Marietta could say anything, however, Yaxley shifted his gaze onto the dark-skinned girl the young Mastiff had stopped in front of. As Bridget faced him, his dark eyes widened ever so slightly and he bared his teeth in a hate-filled leer.

"Well, well, well," he sneered, "finally caught up with you, haven't I, *Miss Jaheem*?"

Bridget glared at him fiercely but did not reply. With a cruel glint in his eyes, Yaxley raised his wand, and Bridget was abruptly yanked into the courtroom after him, with the door slamming shut behind her.

The courtroom was even colder than the hallway had been, and it was little wonder why: there were even more dementors inside the courtroom. They surveyed the proceedings from the stands like the heartless, menacing audience in a coliseum, prepared to cheer as the arena's unfortunate victims were fed to the lions.

Sitting on a platform at the back of the courtroom was Dolores Umbridge, short and toad-like as ever. She was dressed in sickeningly sweet pink robes with a black bow on the top of her head and wore a sparkling golden locket around her neck with an emerald letter “S” on it. Her Patronus – a silvery white ragdoll cat – was curled up in a ball on the railing just in front of her, taking a nap.

Just below and to the right of Umbridge was a heavysset witch with stylish gold-dyed hair, light green eyes, and a strong jaw line, holding a quill and sheets of parchment in her lap. Bridget felt like her face was somehow familiar, but she just couldn’t place it in her memory – the dementors’ presence was creating a weird fog over her brain that made it hard to focus, making everything blurrier and grayer than they likely should’ve been.

Yaxley forced Bridget into a chair and then strode to the upper level, sitting down on the platform just below and to the left of Umbridge.

“You are Bridget Rhapsody Jaheem?” asked Umbridge. Her high voice was very concise and measured as her pouch-like eyes bore into Bridget.

Bridget struggled slightly in taking a breath; there was a dementor right behind her, sucking at the air behind her neck.

*“Come on – you don’t want to seen around **them**,”* Lila’s voice said coolly in her ear.

“Yes,” Bridget said forcefully.

“Daughter of Charlotte Angelica Jaheem and Raymond Melville Hall?”

“Who’s ever heard of Jaheem?” Montague’s voice echoed in Bridget’s head.

Bridget clenched her jaw, closing her eyes as she tried to block out the image of his sneering face. “Yes.”

Umbridge surveyed Bridget with a cool eye. Clearly the dementors’ haze wasn’t affecting her in the slightest – her Patronus was luminous enough that it was a flawless shield.

“Miss Jaheem, you were discovered entering the house of Undesirable Gordon Ramsay...”

Bridget tried to focus on what Umbridge was saying, but the dementor behind her was breathing in her ear. The smell under its hood was ghastly and putrid, like a rotted corpse, and it made Bridget gag.

“ – *genetic disposition* – ”

“ – *can't be expected to be as capable* – ”

“ – *just a Muggle-born* – ”

“Miss Jaheem.”

Bridget pulled as far away from the dementor as she could while chained to the chair, blinking up through the haze at Umbridge.

“I asked you a question,” Umbridge said coolly.

Bridget tried very hard to keep her voice level. “I’m sorry – I didn’t hear it.”

Yaxley gave a great snort. The large, blond-haired woman frowned, exchanging a disapproving look with Umbridge.

“Record the lack of a denial, please, Europa,” Umbridge told the woman, her lips curled up in a sickeningly sweet smile. She then turned back to Bridget. “Miss Jaheem, your record holds several *unsavory* allegations – ”

“ – *Slytherin has standards* – ”

“ – *they're freaks!*”

“Stealing magic from over thirteen wizards while on holiday abroad – ”

“Freak!”

“ – cheat them out of their rightful prize – ”

“ – don’t even want Slytherin to win...”

“ – die alone!”

“Seducing – ”

“What’s wrong with you, you –freak?!”

“ – Magicsnatching trollop – ”

“You’re – you’re just a traitor! A good-for-nothing LOSER!”

“ – and responsible for the attempted murder of a classmate – ”

“ – wouldn’t have gotten so far without Weasley and Greengrass propping her up – ”

Although the dementors swarmed around her, latching onto her worst memories and magnifying them into living nightmares, the thought of her friends and the anger of them being used to insult her cleared Bridget’s mind enough that she could re-anchor herself to the discussion at hand.

“That’s a lie!”

Umbridge stopped abruptly mid-sentence. Her expression tightened visibly; the interruption obviously irritated her.

“*What* is, my dear?” she asked, her tone as sweet as honey mixed with rat poison.

“I never, *ever* hurt Ron,” Bridget shot back fiercely.

Umbridge smiled serenely. “Do you have any witnesses that could speak in your defense?”

“No more than you have witnesses who can prove I did it!” snapped Bridget. Her anger was giving her focus. It was something the dementors couldn’t take from her, and the blazing feeling in her slashed away at the despairing fog she was drowning in.

“You were the only person down in the kitchens the night Mr. Weasley got poisoned,” said Umbridge breezily, clearly already prepared to change the subject, “any *normal* person would consider that more than enough proof to confirm – ”

“Yet you don’t even dare to have my supposed *victim* in this courtroom, or anyone else who might defend me,” Bridget cut her off angrily, “because you know full well that they would contradict *every single tiny thing* coming out of your mouth!”

Yaxley got to his feet, his teeth gnashing together. “Watch your tongue, you worthless Mudblood!”

The woman called Europa actually looked taken aback by Yaxley’s ferocity. Her light green eyes darted from him to Bridget, betraying an oddly confused gleam. Umbridge looked very perturbed by how much Bridget was arguing – clearly none of the other witches and wizards who she’d confronted had been this argumentative.

“You admit, then, that you have the ability to seduce and charm wizards of noble ancestry?” she said sharply, forcefully trying to reestablish control on the proceedings.

Bridget’s eyes went very wide, disbelieving.

“*What...?*” she gasped quietly, her voice a fragile ghost of fury. Umbridge took advantage of the sudden quiet to railroad her.

“Your victim would not speak out against you because you have charmed and brainwashed him into believing you would never harm him – misleading and corrupting an impressionable young man, in the hopes of masking your true intentions – and is that not what the thirteen other reports claim? That you met wizards in transit, collided with them seemingly by chance, and confiscated magic from them that was not rightfully yours – ”

Pansy, Zabini, and Lila’s faces swam in and out of view, bearing down on Bridget like vultures. She struggled to regain her focus, but it was proving difficult.

“ – *Magicsnatcher* – ”

“ – *Mudblood* – ”

“ – *Lesbo* – ”

“No – ”

“And if you could do all that damage,” Umbridge plowed on relentlessly, clearly relishing the authority she was exerting, “imagine the *danger* you could inflict on the Wizarding World, if you were to ever try to procreate! If with a Muggle, you would open our world up to further scrutiny by revealing your magic to your off-spring and spouse, and if with a wizard – ” Yaxley gave a virulent hiss and Europa flinched in disgust, “ – then you would further dilute the already finite resource of magical blood and drag down the entire Wizarding World in the – !”

“*I’M A LESBIAN!*”

Umbridge choked on her sentence. Yaxley and Europa went visibly pale. Bridget raised her head, her face so strained and her black eyes so wide she looked almost mad.

“A LESBO! A DYKE!” she roared at the top of her lungs. “I – LIKE – GIRLS! And I frankly have no interest in having kids, just like I have no interest in taking magic from anybody! *‘I stole magic while on holiday abroad’* – I’d never even *seen* a train station before Hogwarts! My mother and I are poor – we don’t go on holiday! I dare you to find a single shred of a ticket or passport that proves I ever put one *foot* outside of London as a kid! And as for me *‘seducing and charming purebloods,’* try talking to Blaise Zabini or Pansy Parkinson or Theodore Nott or anyone else in my house and see how charming and seductive I am! Oh, but wait, if they confirmed that, they’d be *blood traitors*, wouldn’t they?! *They’d* be *‘dragging the whole Wizarding World down!’* You’d

have to lock every last one of *them* up too, right along with *worthless Mudblood filth like me!*”

Her anger set her aflame. Bridget didn't even care if her words would condemn her – for the first time since she'd entered the courtroom, she'd silenced the voices in her brain. She was alone in her own mind again. She was powerful.

“The truth is, I'm not a threat to the Wizarding World...I'm a threat to *you*,” the dark-skinned Slytherin spat, her lips curled up in a white grin that should have been food for the dementors, but held no joy to sustain them. “You don't care about blood; you just want an army marching lockstep behind you. Well, fortunately for you, Professor Umbridge...I'm not like you. I'm not a coward. So even if every accusation you throw at me is utter bull, you'll never have to actually justify to the world why I'm a threat - because I will not scrape and crawl at your feet in a vain attempt to save my own skin, the way you or any of You-Know-Who's other goons would in my place. No matter what lies you throw out, no matter how much you try to scare me or wear me down, your crap is on the record, plain as day - ” she nodded to Europa and her quill and parchment, " - and I will *never* bow to you.”

Courtroom 3 was left in silence. Yaxley looked murderous. Europa looked from Bridget, to Umbridge, to down at the parchment in her lap, the hand holding her quill shaking visibly. It was as Europa avoided Bridget's gaze, clutching her quill tightly, that she suddenly realized why she'd looked so familiar. The way she avoided everyone's gaze was almost identical to another heavysset girl, though much younger with black hair and brown eyes, when she tried so hard not to intervene as her fellow Slytherins screamed about how they didn't want Bridget sitting at their table.

‘...*Millicent...*?’ Bridget realized in shock.

“Miss Jaheem.”

Umbridge fixed Bridget with a look that seemed better suited to a cockroach. Her cat Patronus prowled back and forth along the railing, its hollow silver eyes narrowing upon Bridget as its tail flicked at the air.

“This court finds you guilty of all charges,” she said in a tone so quiet and cold it was like snake's venom, “and further declares you an active menace on Wizarding society that must be purged forthwith. You will be sent back to Azkaban, whereupon you shall immediately receive the Dementor's Kiss.”

Europa Bulstrode turned to Umbridge, visibly startled.

“Dolores,” she said very quickly and quietly, trying desperately to keep the concern off her face but looking no less solemn, “as per the Ordinance of Azkaban Sentencing, Clause Two, Passage Nine, the Dementor’s Kiss cannot be administered to any convict below the age of 17. The maximum sentence you can administer is captivity until their 17th birthday, at which time a follow-up hearing will be held to determine further sentencing. ... You cannot use the Dementor’s Kiss on her,” she added a little more plainly, when Umbridge’s eyes narrowed sharply.

Umbridge surveyed Europa for a long moment. Then, very slowly, her toad-like jowls curled up in a cold smile.

“For now,” she said lightly.

Umbridge then turned back to Bridget, all trace of a smile gone.

“Take her away,” she spat at the dementors.

And in a flash, Bridget felt herself being carried off by a set of decaying, rotten hands out of the courtroom.

The Sneak

Bridget was escorted down the long hallway by the dementors, past the line of Muggle-borns still waiting their turn. She did not cry or scream as she passed; she merely looked defiant.

Julien and Marietta watched Bridget go, their faces very white and concerned. The young Slytherin gave them both a weak smirk.

“You didn’t think I’d actually be found *innocent*, did you?” she asked coolly.

Marietta opened her mouth as if to say something, but she was interrupted when Yaxley arrived in the courtroom doorway, his hard face menacing in its fury.

“Next!” he snarled.

Marietta winced. Struggling to retain her composure, the curly-haired witch looked down at her list, and Bridget could just barely hear her mumble, “Albert Alderton,” as she was led away down the hall.

In an instant Yaxley raised his wand, yanking the old, balding man into the courtroom by his magical chains, and the door slammed shut behind them. When the door had closed, Marietta turned to Julien, her eyes a little watery but oddly serious.

“...Julien...could you hold things here for a little while? I was supposed to get my break an half hour ago, but it seems my replacement is running late.”

Julien inclined his head in a single, firm nod. “Of course.”

“Thank you.”

Marietta then strode up the stairs and down the hallway. On her way, however, she ran right into a silvery-white winged horse Patronus. Just behind it stood Eddie Carmichael, his wand raised.

“Eddie!” breathed Marietta, her eyes softening slightly in relief. “It’s – ”

Carmichael gave a covert shake of the head, before indicating the wispy, gray-haired witch walking just behind him, who seemed oddly distracted by the swarm of dementors on the far end of the hall.

“Madame Hopkirk,” Marietta greeted respectfully.

Mafalda Hopkirk gave a start, turning quickly around. At the sight of Marietta, her eyes widened ever so slightly.

“Oh, ah – hello, M – Miss Edgecombe,” she said, her voice just as wispy as her appearance.

“Sorry I’m late, I was asked to fetch Madame Hopkirk so she could take over for Madame Bulstrode in the next round of trials,” said Carmichael, trying to keep his tone as level as he could even though he was also trying to see who the dementors were leading away. “Who was just convicted?”

“Bri – ” started Marietta.

“Mafalda.”

Europa Bulstrode had appeared just behind Marietta; both Marietta and Mafalda Hopkirk jumped at her sudden arrival.

“Oh...Europa,” said Mafalda shakily. There was something in her voice that was almost uncertain. Marietta wondered if Europa intimidated Mafalda; she certainly was a very large and glamorous woman, let alone a very powerful one.

Europa strode up to the group, her green eyes resting on Mafalda solemnly. Her face was also oddly pale, like a wave of nausea had recently washed over her.

“I’ve left all of my record-keeping tools at my podium,” she said bluntly. “Dolores will be looking over all trial records tonight, so don’t forget to add the proper framing. Don’t leave out any details

– words, mannerisms, appearance of the accused – anything that might crop up as evidence of guilt.”

Mafalda gave a little wince. “...Y-yes...of course.”

Europa’s gaze then drifted from Carmichael to Marietta, her eyes narrowing almost suspiciously.

“I can see you’re Mafalda’s escort, Mr. Carmichael,” she said quietly, “but what are you doing down here, Miss Edgecombe?”

“I – it’s time for my lunch break, Madame Bulstrode,” Marietta said quickly. “Eddie is my replacement...in the meantime.”

Europa looked over Marietta’s face critically. Then she gave a short, curt nod.

“I see. Enjoy your lunch, then.”

With this, she swept past the three and up the hall. Carmichael turned to Marietta.

“We’ll have to talk later,” he said lowly. “See you in thirty minutes.”

He started up the hall again, Mafalda right behind him. Once Marietta was sure Carmichael, Mafalda, and Europa were all out of sight, she plowed down the hall past the lift. She had no intention of going up to the café today.

The Department of Mysteries was very difficult to navigate, but after scanning several hallways and feeling around for the cold sensation of the dementors, Marietta found them. She’d had to not use her Patronus, at least in the interim, so as to avoid detection. It made it difficult for Marietta to focus, as her thoughts were constantly punctured by the screams of Muggle-born prisoners being taken away and the taunting jeers of her classmates.

“Granger was right – you’re nothing but a SNEAK!”

Marietta plowed on as best she could, peeking around the corner at the door the dementors had approached. A slender gentleman dressed in a turban and dark blue robes with a high black collar underneath stood just to the right of it, a silvery white Borzoi at his side. He raised his wand, unlocking the seven silver locks set up around the doorway so that the door swung open for the dementors. They swooped inside, Bridget trapped in the center of their horde, and the door closed behind them, all seven locks shutting again instantly.

Staying hidden on the other side of the wall, Marietta considered her options. She had to get through that door, but the only way through it was with the help of the Unspeakable guarding it... and he was sure not going to help her if she just *asked*...

There was really only one option, and she really, *really* didn't like it.

Taking a deep breath, Marietta raised her wand and peeked around the corner at the turbaned wizard. The image of a spider tap-dancing over a desk rippled through her mind.

"Think it's funny, do you?" the voice of Mad-Eye Moody came back to her. "What if I did it to you lot, hmm? It'd be an awful good laugh then, wouldn't it?"

Marietta swallowed, locking her gaze solely on the turbaned wizard.

Complete control – she had to keep *complete control* or else he could fight off the curse or, worse, he could be seriously hurt –

"*Imperio*," she whispered.

The wizard immediately straightened up, standing stock-still. Marietta at first was unsure if it had worked. Then, with another deep breath, she thought firmly in the man's direction:

'*Open the door.*'

The turbaned man turned to the door, held aloft his wand, and once again unlocked each of the seven locks. Marietta strode out from behind the corner, coming up to stand just behind him as the door opened. Keeping her wand at her side, she looked into the pitch-black room beyond and then

at the turbaned man staring blankly ahead.

'Lead me inside,' she told him.

The Unspeakable guided his Borzoi Patronus ahead of them as the two walked together into the room.

The room was not just black because of the darkness and the colorless décor, but because of the hundred dementors that dominated the room, popping out from every crevice. They were surrounding a small group of prisoners, which were being dragged one by one through a black zircon fireplace set up at the far end. Unlike the ones upstairs, they didn't seem to use Floo Powder; instead, when a dementor dragged someone into it, the two were consumed by ice blue flames instantaneously and vanished in the blink of an eye.

'Tell me where they're going,' Marietta ordered the Unspeakable sharply.

"Azkaban," the man answered in a quiet monotone.

Unfortunately the word caught the dementors' attention. Hurriedly hiding behind the Unspeakable, Marietta raised her wand and ordered, *'Drive them away!'*

In an instant the turbaned man sent his Borzoi Patronus right into the crowd of gathering dementors, plowing them down and sending them gliding away like unusually graceful rats. As the dementors flinched away from the light, the three Muggle-born prisoners remaining, including Bridget, looked up in shock at their unlikely rescuer.

"W-what – ?" stammered one of them, a very short, brown-haired wizard who Marietta knew was named Westley Crux.

"What – what's happening?" asked the other man in the room, a tall, skeletal man named Han Zheng.

"No time to explain," Marietta forced the Unspeakable to say to them. "Stay behind me."

Crux, Zheng, and Bridget all got up, rushing to the side of the silvery white Borzoi. The dementors in the room hissed and yowled furiously, but were unable to recapture their prisoners thanks to the warmth emanating off of the Patronus.

Marietta's brain whirled. She needed a way to get them out, but how was she going to do it, let alone do it without having to immediately go on the run herself afterwards? She knew she was smart enough to come up with a solution; she just had to think of it...

"Marietta?"

Bridget, being the most conscious of everyone in the room, caught sight of their true savior first. Marietta gave her a weak smile.

"Hi, Bridget," she whispered.

"What – " stammered Bridget, "why are you – ?"

"I knew I would never be able to face my best friend again if I didn't do *something* to help you," said Marietta, reaching out to squeeze her shoulder lightly.

As Marietta had not been focusing on him, the turbaned wizard lowered his wand and his Patronus drifted away toward the far end of the room and started to fade. The dementors yowled hungrily, descending down on them all at once.

'*PROTECT US!*' Marietta quickly ordered the Unspeakable.

The man mindlessly flung himself in front of the three Muggle-borns and Marietta, as Marietta quickly seized hold of Bridget's hand and yanked her toward the door, making sure Crux and Zheng were behind them. Unfortunately Marietta's divided attention made it hard for also keep proper control over the Unspeakable. Because she had ordered him to protect *them*, he did not have enough control over his own mind to re-summon his Patronus and protect himself from the dementors swooping down upon him.

Horried, Marietta dropped her magical control over the man, holding up her wand and screaming, "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

Her magpie Patronus soared out of her wand, flying toward the dementors. They broke apart, leaving the Unspeakable in a heap on the ground. Marietta dashed forward, grabbing the back of his robes, but he was too heavy to lift. Zheng and Crux both ran forward as well, helping her drag him across the floor and out of the room. The silvery white magpie fluttered around the group, shielding them from the dementors that tried to pursue them as they headed for the door. Once they had gotten out of the room, Bridget slammed the door shut behind them, and all seven locks clicked shut, sealing the dementors inside.

Marietta quickly bent down, her face covered in anxiety as she looked over the turbaned wizard. He was so lifeless and pale –

“Oh *please*, no – please don’t be Kissed – *please*, no – ”

Crux came over as well, sliding the man’s closed eye open and feeling his pulse.

“...He’s just fainted,” he pronounced solemnly. “Probably lost consciousness upon waking up in the middle of a crowd of dementors – ”

A large *crash* echoed down the hallway, likely from another room on the other side of the floor. All four of them stiffened in terror.

“What was that?” said Zheng anxiously.

Marietta shot to her feet, her wand out and her face very white and anxious.

Footsteps – someone was running toward them!

Thinking quickly, the curly-haired witch fumbled around in the pockets of the unconscious wizard’s robes until she found the thing she knew all Unspeakables had to have on them at all times: a low grade, Ministry-standard Invisibility Cloak.

‘It won’t be perfect, but it’ll do in a pinch.’

“Crouch under this and stay very quiet,” she told the three Muggle-borns.

She threw the cloak over both them and the Unspeakable like a blanket, turning around just in time to see two scarlet-dressed wizards running toward her.

“Julien!” cried Marietta in relief. “Eddie!”

“Marietta!” said Carmichael excitedly. “There’s a breakout!”

“*What?*”

Julien stopped just in front of Marietta, while Carmichael immediately dashed over to the locked black zircon door.

“It was Albert Runcorn,” explained Julien. “Or at least, someone who *looked* like him, he had a stag Patronus – ”

“A *stag*?” Marietta reiterated disbelievingly.

“Yes. He and Reginald Cattermole bust Mary Cattermole out of her trial and freed the other Muggle-borns – Mafalda Hopkirk was with them. Eddie and I were able to get out of the way before they could Stun us, but with the chaos that they’ll be bringing out upstairs, we knew it’d be the best possible distraction – ”

“How – do – you – *OPEN THIS BLOODY THING!*?” growled Carmichael in frustration.

He tried to blast open the seven locks, but they remained obstinately sealed.

“Eddie!” Marietta said quickly, reaching out and grabbing hold of his arm. “There’s no need for that.”

Sweeping forward, she yanked the Invisibility Cloak off of Crux, Zheng, Bridget, and the turbaned Unspeakable.

“Here’s your chance!” Marietta told the three Muggle-borns with a large smile, as Julien and Carmichael both gawked at her in disbelief. “Get to the entrance grates upstairs! We’ll keep the dementors down here as long as we can.”

Crux and Zheng immediately dashed away toward the lift just up the hall, but Bridget hesitated, looking from Marietta to Julien and Carmichael.

“But what about you?” she asked.

“Don’t worry,” Carmichael said with a wide, confident smile. “We’ll be more than able to handle things here – you just get somewhere safe!”

Julien nodded in firm agreement as he helped Bridget to her feet and fastened the Unspeakable’s abandoned Invisibility Cloak around her shoulders.

“Stay under this – it won’t make you completely invisible, but at least you won’t stick out like a sore thumb. Now go!”

Bringing the hood over her head to cover her face, he shoved her forward, and Bridget, despite her misgivings, obeyed and ran toward the lift as fast as her legs could carry her.

When Bridget made it upstairs, the Ministry was in disarray. Everyone was running and shouting and casting spells; she had to duck several red and green flares as she darted across the room, keeping the Invisibility Cloak securely fastened around her.

A mob of Muggle-borns were running for the fireplaces, shoving Ministry workers out of the way to Apparate out of the Floo grates or to be yanked back up through the public restroom exits. In front of the group at the far back of the hall were three Ministry employees, all blasting spells and summoning Shield charms to force their way through to the exits – wispy, gray-haired Mafalda Hopkirk, a very tall, dark-haired man with a beard who had to be Albert Runcorn, and a ferrety-looking man (likely Reginald Cattermole) who was trying to rationalize with a woman who had her dark hair tied back in a neat bun (likely Mary Cattermole).

Trying desperately to stay quiet, Bridget dashed across the shining tiled floor after the large crowd of Muggle-borns. She had to catch up –

Clang.

The lift had arrived again, carrying a large battalion of red-dressed Aurors and purple-dressed Hit Wizards.

“*Fire!*” roared the wizard at the front, a dark-haired man with a long twisted-looking face.

All at once, the Aurors flooded the floor, blasting scarlet and black spells at the mass of Muggle-borns. Crux just barely avoided one by somersaulting across the tile.

Bridget ran faster, trying to keep her head down to avoid the barrage of hexes and curses. Just ahead, she saw Reginald Cattermole arrive out of a grate – wait – but he was already –

The Reginald who had just arrived confronted the Reginald already on the floor with Mary Cattermole. The Reginald on the floor frantically tried to talk down the other two, who were clearly both very confused and frightened, so that he could leave, but the crowd of Muggle-borns devolved around him, cutting him off from the exits.

“RON, *COME ON!*” cried Runcorn desperately.

Bridget froze mid-step, her black eyes going very wide.

A stag Patronus – this Runcorn had a stag Patronus – didn’t *Potter* have a stag Patronus? And if Runcorn was really Potter, then that meant Mafalda and Cattermole had to be – !

All sense of safety forgotten, Bridget threw off the Invisibility Cloak, running freely down the long hall toward the three Cattermoles.

“*Ron!*” she cried.

The first Reginald Cattermole looked up, shocked. At the sight of her on the opposite end of the hall, his eyes lit up so brightly that they rivaled stars.

“Bridget!”

He ran forward, his face disbelieving and spread into a grin almost stretched to the brim with hope
—

The floor suddenly gave a horrible quake. Bridget and Ron were thrown off their feet and into the air alongside the array of spells shot by the Aurors and Hit Wizards, and in an instant, a scarlet spell collided with Ron, blasting him back almost ten feet. He collided with the side of a fireplace grate headfirst, landing on the floor in an unconscious heap.

“RON!” cried Mafalda’s voice from somewhere far away.

Her heart pounding with terror, Bridget hurried to get up. When she tried to stand, however, her legs screamed in pain, unable to carry even a portion of her weight, and she crumpled in on herself with a small cry.

Both of her legs were broken. She couldn’t move.

Tears of pain welling up in her eyes, Bridget looked over her shoulder at the Aurors bearing down on them.

They’d be on them in seconds – there was no way out – no way out –

Her mind flashed to the dementors and then to Ron – Ron in her place, in that cell in Azkaban – Ron and Harry and Hermione, clutched in the dementors’ rotting hands – Ron and Harry and Hermione in white chains – lying on the floor, their souls drained forever – Ron convulsing on the ground of the Quidditch pitch, foaming at the mouth, then falling still –

The strong emotions that flooded Bridget all at once with no proper outlet overwhelmed and blinded her, as a flare of magic shot through her veins, blasting out of her like an explosion. The blast materialized as a large Shield Charm that flew aggressively at the Aurors, slamming them backward into and trapping them against the wall on either side of the lift.

Bridget sat up on the floor, her arms shakily holding her up on her broken legs, as she blinked through her tears.

On the far end of the hall, through the mess of running witches and wizards, she caught sight of Ron. Mafalda – rather, Granger – was trying to pick him up; Potter as Runcorn was rushing to her side, to help her lift him, to carry him to the fireplace grate – green Killing Curses shot through Bridget’s Shield Charm and blasted holes into walls and the “Magic is Might” statue in the center of the hall – *Avada Kedavra* was powerful enough that it could bypass the barrier that their casters could not –

From a fireplace grate close by emerged another Auror, who Bridget recognized as the brown-haired woman who’d caught her outside of Ramsay’s house.

“No – !” rasped Bridget.

She tried again to get to her feet, to stop her – Potter and Granger got Ron into the fireplace grate, just as the witch seized the edge of Granger’s robes –

And then, abruptly, the four were gone.

Bridget’s black eyes filled with tears as her lips spread into a wide, white smile.

“It’ll be okay, Ron,” she whispered very softly, hoping beyond hope that wherever he was now, he might somehow be able to hear her.

She stopped trying to hoist herself up and quietly fell onto the floor. The Shield Charm finally cracked, and the Aurors all ran forward, the green light from their wands engulfing the entire floor in a matter of seconds.

Ron shot awake abruptly, to find himself lying on a cot inside a tent. He looked around, his blue eyes frantically drinking in Harry and Hermione’s faces, which were both hovering over him and pale with concern.

“Ron, are you all right?” Harry asked anxiously.

Ron’s blue eyes were very wide as he bolted upright. His arm pulsed with pain and he cried out, clutching it and his shoulder.

Looking down, he saw his shirt had been undone and a long trail of skin had been ripped out of his bare arm and shoulder, leaving healed, but bloody red gashes.

“You got Splinched, when we tried to Apparate to safety,” Hermione whispered, her voice very shaky. She clutched her little purple beaded bag over her chest with two trembling hands. “W-we tried to go back to Grimmauld Place, but an Auror grabbed my leg – I had to transport us somewhere else very quickly, if we wanted to escape her...but now she’ll have the knowledge needed to reach the house...”

Ron could barely take in what she was saying. His eyes shot around the empty tent, searching every inch.

“Bridget – where’s Bridget?”

Harry and Hermione looked shocked.

“What?” said Harry.

“*Bridget!*” Ron reiterated desperately. “She was there, right across the hall, running through the crowd! Where is she?! You found her, you – you brought her too – you – ”

Harry and Hermione’s faces went even paler. Ron stared at Harry, silently pleading for an answer, but Harry couldn’t seem to speak. His green eyes were pulsing with horror and remorse the likes of which Ron had never seen before. Harry rose very slowly to his feet, took a shaky step back, and then turned away, his hands clenching into fists at his sides.

“We – we didn’t *see* her, Ron,” Hermione whispered weakly. “We saw you’d gotten Stunned, so w-we ran to get you – it was so loud, and everything was happening so fast – we c-couldn’t see anything, through all the Killing Curses – ”

Ron stared at Hermione as tears streamed from her eyes like rivers.

“No...” he whispered. He couldn’t believe it – he *wouldn’t* believe it –

Hermione reached a hand out to him, her eyes very watery and weak through her tears.

“Ron, I...”

Ron hoisted himself to his feet, ripping himself away from Hermione and plodded uneasily out of the tent, clutching his Splinched arm.

He barely saw the trees or the leaves crunching under his feet – he barely saw anything, with how fast his mind was racing.

Bridget – trapped – Ministry – Killing Curses –

No! She *couldn’t* be dead! She could’ve gotten out – plenty of those Muggle-borns could’ve gotten out – the exits were open – she could’ve gotten out! She – !

Harry and Hermione hadn’t seen her – *why* hadn’t they seen her? She would’ve still been running toward the grates – but there’d been all sorts of spells flying through the air – red Stunners – green Killing Curses –

No! She couldn’t be dead! She was smart, she was resourceful – she somehow got loose, even though she wasn’t with the Muggle-borns he, Harry, and Hermione had originally freed – she must have had a way out – she must have had help somewhere –

He’d been able to fight off the Ministry workers trying to capture them – but he’d done that with a wand. Bridget would’ve had no wand – she couldn’t even Apparate yet, and if she were caught trying to escape, she’d be considered too dangerous to simply imprison –

NO! She was alive! She *had* to be alive! She *had* to be – !

Ron slammed his fist into a nearby tree, tears spilling from his wide, hollow blue eyes.

He should've reached her – *Harry* should've reached her, or Hermione – how could they have just *left* her? Who cares if she was far away, who cares if they couldn't have seen her, who cares if they never would've been able to reach her in time, how could they have – no, how could *he* have left her!?

Bridget had been so thrilled to see him. Her black eyes had been shining. Her smile had been blazing. After knowing nothing about where she was or if she was okay for so long, it had been such a relief to see her alive and safe – now the memory was a knife stabbing him in the chest over and over again, cutting deeper every time –

Ron hunched in on himself in the night air, clutching his shoulders as he quaked in silent sobs.

He'd failed her. He hadn't invited her to stay with him, before the Ministry started hunting Muggle-borns. He hadn't found her, before she got caught. He hadn't gotten to the Department of Mysteries sooner and found out she was there, so he could bust her out. He hadn't saved her –

He'd failed her.

Amycus Carrow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

September 1, 1997

Oh, Ron,

My heart could not be in more pain, hearing about Bridget! To think of her trapped in that awful place – no wonder she hadn't written to us sooner! I really hope that she was able to escape!

Please be safe, everyone,

Astoria

DeAr RoN,

I foUnd this Old piCture of BridGet iN my trunk – I've reallY miSsed Seeing her sMile. I Really hOpe she's okaY...

Write MOre later,

COliN

Ron,

Bridget's fate may sound dire, but I implore you to keep up the faith. Neither Harry nor Hermione ever saw a flare of green pierce her chest – therefore we have no evidence yet that she is gone forever.

P lease don't give up hope.

Arjuna

Arjuna's right. Bridget is very resourceful – I'm sure she'll be all right. In the meantime, we must stay strong, for her. And I'm sure wherever she is, she'll know we're thinking of and praying for her.

Kevin

September 2, 1997

Scoured my mother's files last night for any mention of Bridget, but found nothing, not even a transcript of her trial. I'm very concerned: Mother's record keeping has always been flawless, even for those cases that ended in convictions or supposed-suicides.

MB

Millicent – what do you think that means? Do you think Bridget's file was stolen? Destroyed?

Stay safe, everyone!

Cho

Cho – Confiscated, yes. The question is why.

MB

Perhaps Bridget's trial transcript wasn't particularly flattering to the Ministry or their prosecutors. From what I understand Thicknesse is catching wise that there are people on the inside leaking information (given the leaflets that the Abraxans have been publishing), so they may have wanted to make sure that they were sealed somewhere safe.

I know the uncertainty is terrible, but I'm certain that this fog will pass...and in the meantime, we must keep up our prayers.

Stay strong, everyone!

Regards,

Arjuna

“Hannah.”

The now-seventh-year Hufflepuff prefect looked up. Susan Bones had stopped eating breakfast and was looking at her concernedly.

“Everything okay?” she asked softly.

Hannah brought a hand up to wipe away a small tear that had been forming in her eye, smiling at her best friend as she closed the book.

“Oh...yes, I'm all right.”

Even though Susan knew about her scrapbook, Hannah didn't want to explain what she'd read while at the Hufflepuff table. Even with the Great Hall being as barren as it was, she knew it wasn't safe to speak too openly.

Once the two girls had finished breakfast, Hannah tucked her canary yellow scrapbook into her schoolbag with the rest of her books and followed Susan and Ernie to their first class – Defense Against the Dark Arts.

“I still can’t believe that we’ve got a *Death Eater* teaching us how to defend ourselves against the Dark Arts,” muttered Ernie sourly. The slash that Bellatrix had delivered to his face had scarred over as a thick line that cut his face into two diagonal halves. “At least Crouch Jr. was pretending to be Mad-Eye Moody the entire time, but *Amycus Carrow* – ”

“Seems a little seedy, I know,” Hannah agreed lowly.

Ernie’s cheeks puffed out furiously.

“A *little*!” he scoffed. “He’s an Inferi with a heartbeat! Or at least *supposedly* – I certainly see no visual evidence that any blood runs through his veins – ”

“Ernie,” Susan whispered warningly.

She shot two significant glances around at the crowd of other (mostly Slytherin) seventh years coming down the hallway on either side of them, also heading for the classroom that had last year been owned by Professor Snape.

The classroom that had, just the year before, been dark and elegant and covered with pictures of dark spells and their effects had been transformed yet again. This time there was no elegance – the room looked barren and lifeless, like the teacher in question had had no interest in creating any visual stamp on the space. The windows were also all covered over with impenetrable black stone, which meant that the only light in the room came from the candles on the iron chandelier overhead. Snape’s old desk still sat on the head of the class, but the man sitting behind it with his legs propped up lackadaisically on the wood gave off none of his strict, cold poise.

Amycus Carrow was a squat man with dark hair, tiny light blue eyes, and a bloodless, pasty face. As his students filed in, he looked them over with dull interest. Occasionally his eyes would linger on one in particular and his lips would curl up in a slight, ugly smirk like the kind a fox would give a rabbit.

Hannah sat down and looked around at the class. She was shocked by how small it was. All of the seventh years from the four houses sat comfortably in one room now, and she knew every single person there: for Hufflepuff, her, Susan, and Ernie; for Ravenclaw, Terry Boot, Michael Corner, and Anthony Goldstein; for Slytherin, Daphne, Millicent, Malfoy, Pansy, Zabini, Crabbe, Goyle, and Tracey Davis; and for Gryffindor, Lavender and Neville. In the past the thirty-two students would have been split up into two classes, with two houses in each one; now, with only nineteen, it

clearly had been deemed more efficient to stuff them all into one large class.

Neville sat down at the desk next to Hannah's, looking around the room uneasily. Seeing his discomfort, Hannah offered him a small smile.

"It's...kind of cool that we get to study Defense together this year," she whispered. "I mean, we've always been just paired with the Ravenclaws...it almost feels like we're back in the D.A.! Except with the Slytherins, I mean," she added a little sheepishly.

Neville smiled slightly around a light blush.

"Yeah," he mumbled, clearly touched by her concern. "Guess so..."

Before he could say anything else, however, Amycus Carrow rose to his feet and addressed the class.

"Morning, kiddies," he greeted lightly. His voice had a sleazy, weasel-like quality that left a bad taste in Hannah's mouth. "Welcome to class. Seventh years, ain't you?"

None of the class spoke, though some of the Slytherins gave silent nods. Amycus's mouth spread into a wicked, delighted grin.

"Smashing," he said in low pleasure.

He came around the desk and strolled up and down the rows of students, holding his wand idly over his chest as his tiny light blue eyes trailed over them all.

"So! I know you've had a lotta teachers in this subject before – hasn't everyone? And most of 'em – well, let's be honest, spewed a lotta false facts. Well, fortunately fer you lot, you have one more year here to...*reeducate* yourselves."

He whipped his wand at the air. In an instant, the blackboard flipped over, to reveal a chart etched out in white chalk that covered every square inch of the surface. It was hard for Hannah to read all of the writing, which was quite messy and varied in size frequently, but at the center of the

diagram, framed by a drawing of a thick wall, she could read one text bubble written in red chalk in all caps:

THE WIZARDING WORLD

The other bubbles decorating the edges of the blackboard were enchanted to slam up against and cut away at the wall protecting the large red text. Some of them said things like “*blood-mixing*” and “*cultural contamination.*”

“There are a lotta threats to our world today,” Amycus said dryly, as he continued to migrate up and down the aisles. “False history – government traitors – even so-called ‘*intellectuals*’ who spew the virtue of surrendering our culture and heritage in order to conform to the Muggle ideal...”

Amycus stopped just in front of Lavender’s desk, his light blue eyes boring into her.

“But!” he said sharply. “Do we see the Dark Arts anywhere on this board?”

Lavender looked too ill to answer. Her mouth hung open in dismay and her eyes stayed locked on the blackboard so she wouldn’t have to look at Amycus. The lack of a reply didn’t bother Amycus – instead he turned and continued down the row, his lips curled up in an even larger, more unpleasant smile.

“No! And you wanna know why? Because, in truth, the Dark Arts are not the problem. The Dark Arts did not cause unemployment, or instability, or terror...yet everyone in the Wizarding World loves to use the Dark Arts as a scapegoat – as in, if something goes wrong, it must be the work of Dark Magic. A Mudblood witch attacked a pureblood? Ooh, it must be the Dark Arts. Ex-Minister of Magic axes off the current one? Gotta be the Dark Arts! Hogwarts student gets killed in a school competition? Must be the Dark Arts – ”

Everything coming out of Amycus’s mouth had made Hannah upset, but it was the mention of Cedric that seemed to push everyone’s buttons the wrong way. Ernie and Michael Corner opened their mouths as if to say something, but surprisingly the person who spoke up first was Neville.

“No, it ‘*must be*’ Voldemort.”

His sharp, yet quiet voice made the entire classroom flinch. Amycus's light blue eyes flew to Neville like a shot, widening dangerously. The other students all watched anxiously as he took three slow, plodding steps forward, stopping right in front of Neville's desk.

"Longbottom, is it?" he asked very quietly.

"Yes," said Neville, raising his chin slightly with defiant pride.

Amycus's upper lip curled. "Well, 'Bottom..."

In a flash he'd raised his wand arm and smacked Neville right across the face, throwing him back against the edge of his seat.

The students all gasped in shock. Hannah bolted to her feet, her face horrified.

"*Neville!*" she cried.

Amycus turned to her, his eyes half-mad, and she flinched back despite herself. Then he glanced down at Neville, who was cradling his face gingerly with the back of his hand.

"Let that be a warning," he said coldly, "that I don't much care fer interruptions or back-talk. Twenty points from Gryffindor fer now, but if you do it again, I might consider passing around *detentions*."

He swept down the row, ignoring the hate-filled look that Neville shot him as he passed. Hannah very slowly lowered herself back down into her seat, watching Neville with anxious eyes.

"As I was saying, the Dark Arts are an easy target fer condemnation – but what I hope to impress upon you lot is the value in the *wielder*. After all, the Killing Curse never killed anyone – it was the person who cast it effectively. Say those words without really *meaning* it and you couldn't hurt a fly – say those words to kill someone who means you, or your family, or your friends, or your community harm...and you're a hero."

He paused in front of Daphne's desk, his tiny light blue eyes running over her face. Daphne,

despite her reluctance, glanced up at him without raising her head.

“Daphne Greengrass?” the stout man said, almost as a rhetorical question.

Daphne spared the slightest of nods.

“My, my!” said Amycus. His lips spread into a leer that could curdle milk. “How you’ve grown...a spitting image of your mother, ‘cept fer the eyes – ”

Daphne kept her face as stony as possible, but Hannah could see how pale she’d become. Hannah couldn’t blame her; her mother Theia Greengrass had been born into the Carrow family, so Theia and her daughters had to be *related* to this disgusting man! Hannah had never felt more sorry for Daphne and Astoria in her life.

“So, Daphne,” Amycus purred coolly, “how much d’you know about the Cruciatus Curse?”

Daphne’s dark eyes drifted away, landing somewhere on the wall that led to the door at the back of the classroom.

“It’s one of the three Unforgivable Curses,” she said quietly. “It inflicts a blast of concentrated pain to its victim.”

Amycus’s leer widened slightly. “Beautiful *and* brilliant, I see.”

Daphne couldn’t quite fight back a cringe as Amycus walked past her down the aisle.

“Yes, as Daphne said, it’s a curse that inflicts pain – ‘*victim*’ might be a strong word, o’ course... ‘*target*’ would be more correct...”

Neville’s eyes flared with loathing, but Hannah caught his eye, anxiously mouthing “*No!*” to him. It distracted him just long enough that he didn’t get the chance to speak before Amycus plowed on.

“The Cruciatus Curse, like the other two Curses that lily-livered intellectuals call ‘*Unforgivable*,’ is

only a tool: it can be used fer good as well as evil – hell, more often than not, it’s used fer good *more* than fer evil. Yet you’ve been taught by false history and anti-Wizard propaganda that they’re a crime against nature, when in truth they’re our best line of defense against the things we fear. Not even the most deluded of Guilders can’t be corrected with an Imperius Curse. Not even the most devoted of traitors can resist giving up intelligence to a Cruciatus Curse. And yes – not even the most violent of Mudbloods can’t be taken down by a Killing Curse.”

Terry Boot looked outraged. He whirled on Amycus, who was strolling past the end of his row.

“That’s bloody rich, coming from someone who was arrested for being a Death Eater,” he spat. “I suppose you were just casting *Cheering Charms* when you were running through these halls looking for Dumbledore?”

In seconds Amycus had raised his wand and Terry crumpled up on the floor, writhing and screaming in pain. Neville and Ernie got to their feet, taking out their wands too, but Amycus waved his wand at them, locking them to their chairs with horrible black chains that wound around their arms, legs, and necks like a stranglehold. All of the students – even those more sympathetic to Death Eater sensibilities like Tracey Davis and Blaise Zabini – flinched as Amycus strode past Terry on the floor, giving him a pointed kick that made the Ravenclaw clench his teeth in pain.

“Fifty points from Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor, and a week’s detentions fer the three of you,” snarled Amycus.

Hannah stared at the horrible, leering man as he migrated to the front of the classroom, his tiny light blue eyes narrowed.

“Let me make one thing *inescapably* clear,” he said coldly. “Your past professors may have been okay with your little *interjections*. They may have liked you contributing without being asked. But what you contributed, and what they fed you so that you could contribute, are all false facts. Therefore, you are in *remedial* studies this semester, and I’m the person assigned to get you up-to-scratch in time fer you to survive in the world today. If I do my job right...if you take in everything I’m drilling into your head without whining, without shooting your mouth off...you may – *may* – survive. You might even live *well*, in the brand new world that’ll emerge from this one’s ashes. You might get the job you want, make the money you need, have a family with seven kids. But I have no patience fer people who are too lazy – stupid – worthless – *pathetic* to live in the real world – neither does your Headmaster, neither does your Minister, and neither does our world. Try mouthing off to one of them, and see how far you’ll get – how far your *family* will get.”

A chill ran through the entire room. Even Terry, who was still crumpled up on the floor, couldn’t fight back a tremble.

“The only enemy of the Dark Arts,” whispered Amycus, “are those who fear the power beating inside ordinary people – in pure, noble witches and wizards who wish to assert their power over their inferiors, to bring their world back to its former glory. You’ll either be one of those witches or wizards who are proud of our magical power and willing to use it, or you’ll be one of those inferiors. You’re either with the Wizarding World, or you’re with the traitors...and I assure you, our world shows no mercy for traitors.”

The rest of the class was as horrid as it began. No one else said a word for the entire period, leaving Amycus to rail on about how the Dark Arts were a mere piece of a well-balanced magical arsenal, perfect to use against dangerous threats to magical security like Guilders or Muggle-borns. It left Hannah feeling sick to her stomach.

Ernie and Neville had been left chained to their chairs three hours after the class was over, serving as an example to the younger classes of the consequences of acting out of turn. Ernie finally caught up with Hannah and Susan in the afternoon, and the two girls walked him over to the kitchens so he could get something to eat before their next class, as he’d been forced to miss all of lunch.

“He’s – ” growled Ernie, eating the rest of an apple turnover he’d gotten from the kitchens as he walked down the hallway with his friends, “he’s *despicable*! An absolutely disgusting, uncivil, maniacal *madman*!”

Hannah nodded fervently. “I know – what he did to Neville – to Terry and you? It was *beyond* cruel, it was *terrible*!”

“Lavender went to Professor McGonagall afterwards and told her what Carrow did, and McGonagall was furious,” said Susan, her voice low with anger. “If *she* were in charge, I bet she would’ve packed him off to Azkaban in three seconds, but with Snape in charge - well, even if *he* cared, the Minister who appointed Carrow sure wouldn’t.”

Ernie finished the turnover at last, swallowing before speaking again.

“...I felt so awful, watching him rant to the fifth year class. He kept leering at Astoria like he had Daphne – you know, looking her over, giving her weird compliments? It was just vile – ”

Hannah’s heart flared with righteous anger. “If he so much as *touches* Astoria, I’ll – I’ll – ”

She couldn't think of a good way to end the threat, but she didn't care; she could think of any number of imaginary punishments she could throw Amycus's way that would feel like justice. Susan took her hand and squeezed it reassuringly as the three approached the Potions classroom.

Like the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, the Potions dungeon had also been transformed. Gone were the freshly potted Mandrakes and multi-colored potion bottles lined up on the bookcases, as well as the bronze cauldrons set up in front of Ramsay's cherrywood desk. Instead the space was a little more elegant, with beautiful antique bookcases lined with Potions textbooks, standard pewter cauldrons, and a large old-fashioned white and black desk at the very front. Hannah saw even fewer seventh year students here than in Defense Against the Dark Arts – clearly this teacher, unlike Amycus Carrow, had only taken the students who had *actually* received an OWL in the subject. Besides her, Ernie, and Susan, only Malfoy, Pansy, Zabini, Tracey, Daphne, Millicent, Terry, and Anthony sat at the desks around Hannah. There were no Gryffindor students; the only ones who'd been in the NEWT class last year – Harry, Ron, Hermione, Parvati, and Eloise Midgen – were all in hiding.

Hannah deliberately plowed across the room and settled down at the desk next to Terry. He looked unusually white, as if he'd been bleached in a Muggle washing machine.

"Terry, are you all right?" she asked quietly.

Terry gave her his best attempt at a smug smile.

"Oh sure!" he said in a good attempt at cocky. "Right as rain, doll – and just as cool, too."

His usual swagger seemed to have been shaken, though; his eyes kept avoiding Hannah's face.

Hannah fixed him with a gently skeptical expression.

Terry had always been unusually confident, even for a Ravenclaw. Of all of his dormmates, he was the one who always got the most into the "friendly competition" between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, teasing Hufflepuffs and puffing both his and Ravenclaw's collective chest whenever the occasion arose. Some Hufflepuffs even saw Terry as the "jerk" Ravenclaw who constantly put down their house just to try to elevate his own, but Hannah had always given him the benefit of the doubt. After all, Terry had joined the D.A. in fifth year to fight Voldemort, and when the Death Eaters had burst into Hogwarts, he fought then too. Therefore, under all of that bravado, there had to be an upright moral compass somewhere.

“...It was really good of you, to stand up to Carrow like that,” said Hannah kindly. “It was so hard, hearing him say those things...I’m glad you said something. Neville, too.”

Terry looked up at Hannah, faintly surprised. Then, feigning an off-hand air, he looked away again.

“Oh, it...was just the *decent* thing to do,” he said idly. “Really, I would’ve been able to let loose a bunch more luxurious swears, if he’d given me the chance – ”

“You could just say ‘*thank you*’ and leave it at that,” said Hannah, her brown eyes glittered reproachfully at Terry around her smile.

Terry grinned cheekily. “Now where’s the fun in that?”

At that moment the door at the back of the classroom leading to the teacher’s office opened. All of the students looked up.

A portly gentleman dressed in black satin robes and a velvet waistcoat strolled into the room, closing the door behind him and smiling around his white walrus-like mustache at the assembled students.

“Good afternoon, class,” said Horace Slughorn jovially.

Hannah had never been so comforted by a Potions class in her life, not even when Ramsay was teaching. Last year Potions had been fun, but this year, after having had to sit through such a horrible class as Amycus Carrow’s, measuring ingredients and stirring potions had been almost medicinal to Hannah’s spirit. It felt like how school was supposed to feel – like everything was as it was supposed to be – and Slughorn was encouraging, instructive, and composed as a professor should be.

“A quarter-turn to the left should do it, Miss Davis – very nice, Millicent! Take five points for Slytherin. Easy, Mr. Goldstein – mind the fire, Mr. Boot – Hannah m’dear, such lovely spirals! Five points to Hufflepuff!”

After class the students all moved to pack up, ready to head off to dinner.

“Hannah!” Slughorn called over the din. “Millicent, Daphne – might I have a word after class, please, in my office?”

Hannah blinked in surprise, but nodded to Ernie and Susan encouragingly.

“Go on,” she told them, “I’ll meet you in the Great Hall.”

Little by little, the class filed out of the classroom, and Millicent, Daphne, and Hannah followed Slughorn into his office. The portly professor settled down behind his office desk, which was a light blue and surrounded by old pictures of Hogwarts alumni and the occasional celebrity.

“Millicent, my dear, if you would close the door,” Slughorn said kindly.

Millicent obeyed, bringing her heel against the bottom corner of the office door and sliding it closed with a *snap*. The three girls all turned to Slughorn, who beamed at them, his eyes watery and sparkling.

“Thank you for meeting me,” he said softly, giving a slight sniff. “You have no idea how happy I am, to see you three all right...when I heard about Owen and his mother, at the Ministry – ”

“You know about Owen?” said Hannah, startled.

Slughorn smiled sadly. “Oh yes...Gordon sent word to me, covertly, after he learned the news. He told me about Millie, how she was likely framed...and that poor Bridget is unaccounted for, as well...”

The girls all looked down at the floor. They didn’t have it in their hearts to tell Slughorn about what Ron had told them. Not only did they not want to believe that Bridget’s fate could be even *worse* than before, but they didn’t want to say anything about their scrapbooks.

Slughorn looked them over, his dark eyes filled with pity.

“Last June I promised Gordon that if he were unable to return to Hogwarts this year, I would take his place,” he explained softly. “I suppose I’m fortunate that my connections and ancestry allowed me to *slip through* any scrutiny from Pius or Severus...”

His tone grew a little colder and darker in the back of his throat at the mention of the Minister and new Headmaster. He stood up, turning his back to the three girls as he looked over the assortment of pictures set up on the wall behind his desk.

“I had so many great students, before I retired,” he said quietly. “So many classes, full of so much potential – a lot of it was fulfilled, but some of it...was squandered.”

His eyes landed on one picture in particular – Hannah tilted her head, trying to recognize any of the faces, but the photograph was so old and the moving figures were so small that it proved difficult.

“I’ve always tried to ignore my mistakes,” said Slughorn, his voice betraying some emotion despite himself. “Tried to idealize the past, cast away the parts I didn’t approve of...and I suppose, in a sad way, I imagined everyone else would do the same: hold onto what should be preserved...and forget what shouldn’t.”

Daphne raised her head, her eyes very solemn.

“...But people don’t do that, sir,” she said softly. “That takes too much thought – too much...”

“Too much humility,” Slughorn finished with a wry smile. “Yes – for no one would see the flaws in one’s past, if one refuses to see them at all. No one can make things better, if he’s too proud to acknowledge his own fallibility.”

He turned to the three girls, his eyes twinkling like stars.

“Fortunately, I’ve had a lot of time to wrestle with my pride and come to grips with the things I’ve run from for so long. Perhaps we may all be fenced in by circumstance, my girls...but still, I believe, we can endure, for we must. For Bridget, for Gordon – for Millicent, for Albus – for Harry – we can, and we must, endure.”

Chapter End Notes

Why yes, this characterization of Terence "Terry" Boot was inspired by [the Dom's interpretation of the character](#). (BTW go watch the Dom's Harry Potterathon. Do it now.)

The Unfathomable Concept

September 3, 1997

Guys –

I had a thought about Bridget! What if the reason her file is missing is because she escaped, and the Ministry's trying to cover it up?? I was talking to Noel after dinner, and they said it was plausible – given the Ministry's stance about Muggle-borns being inferior to purebloods, maybe an underage Muggle-born witch Disapparating out of the custody of some of the most powerful witches and wizards in the country was too much of a scandal for them to let circulate! What do you think??

Mr. Malfoy's actually started sitting at the table at mealtimes now. He doesn't talk much and he constantly looks like he's swallowed a lemon, but at least he's there! Noel constantly glares at him over the table, but Trudy and Beau agree with me that it's good that he's eating more.

xoxoxo

Rose

Rose, that's a brilliant idea! Bridget is awful good at magic – I bet she could've Disapparated, if she tried! And just imagine how much that kind of a story would damage the Death Eaters' narrative – can't see the new Prophet publishing anything that could prove that Muggle-borns can be good at magic too!

Working overtime again this week, but I hope I'll be able to tape in some Muggle pictures I took of Dennis's school on my day off. There's a nice field for football and a huge outdoor track, and they've got a great library with brand new computers! (They're these sort of metal boxes that can help you write and edit papers and look up information. They even can help you keep in touch with people through "email," "chatrooms," and instant messaging – sort of like what we're doing, except without a quill and parchment! Dennis has been using them to do his homework and to print out Muggle news articles for me.)

Cheers!

Colin

We learned a little bit about computers from Professor Burbage! She said they're still pretty new, so it's great that Dennis's school has them. I'd love to try using one sometime – it sounds like fun!

I hope your theory's true, Rose...Disapparating's supposed to be really difficult, but perhaps if Bridget read ahead on the theory, it's possible?

Stay safe, everyone!

Astoria

Colin – those computers at your brother's school sound wonderful! I'd love to try to use the (I hope I'm spelling this correctly) "Internet" sometime!

The theory of Disapparition is supposed to be quite complicated, from what little I've read of it; if one isn't careful, they could potentially injure themselves while trying to transport themselves to a new location, particularly if the location is far away. And like most magic, I think Apparition would require a wand, at least for most people. Cho, Hannah, Millicent, Daphne, Ron, you took Disapparition classes – what do you think?

Regards,

Arjuna

September 4, 1997

I like your theory, Rose, but Disapparating out of the Ministry of Magic wouldn't be easy. You can only Apparate and Disapparate in certain areas at the Ministry now, and even if Bridget had read ahead on the theory, you really need to know more than just the reading to Apparate properly. Mum even taught me about Apparition before I took the test, and I still needed to put in the practice to do it without Splinching – you know, leaving a body part behind. Plus, like Arjuna said, most people need a wand in order to Apparate – if Bridget was in custody, her wand would've been confiscated.

This isn't to say that Bridget still couldn't have made it out! Her escaping would be a great reason for the Ministry to try to cover up that she'd ever been there. I hope that's true, and that wherever she is she's safe.

Looking forward to seeing your pictures, Colin!

Love,

Hannah

Hannah – how would you avoid losing a limb, if you needed to Apparate? Could you do it without triggering the Trace, if you were underage? Just curious...

Here are the pictures I promised – hope you all like them!

Cheers!

Colin

Beautiful pictures, Colin! Even if they're Muggle photographs, I can still feel the movement in every shot – it makes me feel like I'm really there! You never cease to impress me.

My “phoenix” cake is coming along slowly, though carving feathers out of cake is very time-consuming. I'll probably start over with a new cake next week; I'm wondering if I can get better texture by integrating carved fruit rather than just frosting.

Don't forget to tune into Potterwatch tomorrow night! Maybe if we're lucky, they might have news of Bridget!

Kevin

Colin,

I'd love some more details about why you want to know about Apparition. I'm sorry for being suspicious, but I really don't want you to do anything dangerous! Please tell me?

Love,

Hannah

September 5, 1997

Okay...

The articles Dennis has been printing for me are about the rash of Muggle kidnappings, presumably by the Guilders. There have been ten more disappearances just in the last month. Some of them even happened right here in Glasgow – in fact, Dennis told me one of the missing boys had originally been from his class. What I worry about is a Guilder trying to kidnap Dennis or me while we're in hiding as Muggles; we wouldn't be able to use magic to defend ourselves, but if we could Disapparate without being followed or tracked, maybe we could get away without hurting anyone...

Write back soon,

Colin

I see...I'm sorry for my suspicion, Colin: your reasoning makes more than enough sense.

Mum used to break Apparition down into the three D's: Destination, Determination, and Deliberation. To put it another way, you must break down your desire to move to a new location into three steps – even if you feel the intense desire to escape, you must take the time to go through each of these steps carefully in your head in order to get where you want to go without Splinching.

First is Destination. If you can't clearly visualize where you want to go to the extent that you can vividly imagine yourself being there, then don't even start. If the image of your destination is faulty, then you'll likely end up in multiple places at once, in pieces. Don't EVER try to Apparate out of the country.

Second is Determination. In order to Apparate, you have to be so focused on moving that you can transport yourself to another location through sheer will alone. If you're the least bit lacking in confidence that you will move, or are reluctant about moving in the first place, then you'll either only send a piece of yourself to that new location or worse transport yourself right back where you started, only with body parts missing.

Last is Deliberation...or, as Mum used to redefine it sometimes when people were having trouble, Detachment. You cannot and should not try to Disapparate spontaneously. Even the best Apparition experts need to put in the proper thought before Disapparating. It might look easy sometimes, but it's not: not only do you need to properly focus your magic with a wand, but you need to mentally detach yourself from the very ground you're standing on, so that you're fluid enough to flow through space, from one location to another. Disapparating doesn't feel that great (honestly, it kind of feels like being scrunched up like a wet dish rag and shoved through a really

narrow tube), so if you want to prevent hurting yourself, you almost have to detach from your physical body – become malleable enough to slip out of your current location and into another one. And that takes a lot of thought and introspection – you can't do that kind of thought exercise on a whim.

As for Apparating without being tracked, the important thing would be only to Disapparate around other witches and wizards. Of course the Trace would still alert the Ministry to your existence there, but it'd be harder for them to determine your new location if you use magic in the company of other magical signatures. It's the same reason why many students from magical families don't tend to get punished as often if they use magic over the holidays as Muggle-borns do, because underage magic is most often pinpointed for being an anomaly in any given area, and if there are other magical people around, it's harder for the Ministry to claim it had to have been the underage witch or wizard who was responsible. In a weird way, the concern is less about students using magic outside of school but using magic outside of school without being monitored by a responsible magical adult who could potentially reverse any spells. Again, though, it's still risky to Apparate even in the company of other witches and wizards because the Trace would alert the Ministry that you were in that area and they might go investigate it. If you Apparated a few blocks away to escape a Guilder, then your entire neighborhood could suddenly be in the cross hairs. I would highly recommend not Disapparating unless you really, really have to.

I hope this helps, Colin – please be careful, and tell your brother to be careful too!

Love,

Hannah

Just finished watching the Potterwatch broadcast with Mum and Dad! For those of you who couldn't tune in, here's an update:

It sounds like Bridget's file is not the only one missing. The Abraxans sent a report into "River" that several files have mysteriously disappeared from the MASTIF archives, but no one knows what's happened to them or why they were taken out. I'm sure the Abraxans will find out, though – they seem so determined!

The next broadcast will be on October 2, and the password is "Mad-Eye." Don't forget to tune in, and when you do, imagine me listening to the broadcast right along with you!

Kevin

September 8, 1997

My suspicions were correct: Alecto Carrow's class is just as terrible as Amycus's. We just spent an entire "Muggle Studies" class (which has now become mandatory, by the way) where Alecto ranted about how Muggles have "always been the aggressors" and that because we've been "forced underground by them," we're now supposedly rising up against a tyrannical majority! The lengths to which she and Amycus try to paint themselves and other blood purists as victims, when they're the ones hurting and killing people just for being different – UGH! It's just infuriating!

I've been going to the library as much as I can to try to get actual information, but even there, a lot of Madame Pince's textbooks have been confiscated for supposedly being full of "fake history." Oh, R.J., I wish I could borrow some of your mother's books right now! Do you think you could find and copy a passage on werewolves for me? We're supposed to study them this year, but of course Amycus has not seen any use in discussing them.

In other news, there was a group of third year Gryffindors complaining about the Carrows behind their backs yesterday, but before Alecto could punish them, Slughorn stepped in and gave them detention with him instead. As soon as Alecto was out of earshot, Slughorn turned to the three boys with a grin and asked what flavor of ice cream they'd like to have at their session tonight! I'm sure Ramsay would be so proud of him, were he here!

Love from

Astoria

It's fortunate Slughorn stepped in. Today I saw a second year Ravenclaw lying on a bed in the Hospital Wing, twitching and sobbing. Madame Pomfrey told Flitwick that he'd just gotten out of detention with Amycus. I've never seen her so close to tears before.

MB

Here, Stori, this should help! I couldn't be more in agreement with you about the Carrows – they're the furthest things from "victims" I've ever heard of!

Love from

Arjuna

September 10, 1997

Despite the additional scrutiny from the Carrows and Snape, Hannah, Millicent, Astoria, and I were able to meet up in the kitchens this afternoon, at least for a few hours. I've never been more grateful for Koko and the other Hogwarts house elves: they Disapparated us all to our dorms covertly afterwards to help keep us out of trouble. It seems the elves loathe our new leadership just as much as we do...

As our Cooking Club was incomplete, we cooked an assortment of dishes in your honor, so that the house elves could drop them off in the Great Hall at dinner. Here are the pictures we took, but just in case the dishes aren't clear, we made a chocolate cream pie for Ron, Nutella and banana bread for Rose, a carrot cake for Cho, a lemon meringue decorated with sherbet lemons for Kevin, lukhmis for Arjuna, potato soup with bacon and asparagus for Bridget, and a loaf of Hawaiian sweet bread for Owen.

Remember that we keep you in our thoughts always, even when we don't explicitly say so. It pains me that you all are put at such risk, while we enjoy the cold comfort of routine.

Love,

Daphne

September 11, 1997

Dear Daphne,

Everything looks delicious! I'm trying to imagine the wonderful smells that must have emanated from the kitchens. It's really nice you made it for the other students, too – I'm sure it must've really brightened up their evening.

My roommate Amanda and I explored some of the off-Broadway theaters last week – here are some Muggle pictures I took. I sent a few to Marietta too, though of course I had to keep my letter concise and short to avoid any scrutiny. I really wish I could introduce her to Amanda – Amanda's so bubbly and adventurous, but she also totally adores the arts and her family, just like Marietta. I'm not entirely sure if Amanda likes girls or not (she doesn't seem that interested in men, at least), but ever since I met her, my matchmaking senses have just been tingling so hard!! I know it'll probably never happen, but oh, it still makes me laugh!

Stay safe, everyone! You all are in my prayers always.

Love,

Cho

You all look like you were having so much fun, Daphne, Astoria, Millicent, and Hannah! I wish I could've been there with you. Thank you for the "sherbet lemon" pie, Astoria – I knew that one had to be your idea, and it brought such a smile to my face!

If you're thinking of asking Amanda about her romantic preferences, Cho, just keep in mind that non-heterosexual people are generally less accepted in the Muggle world than they are in the Wizarding World. Even at home Mum and Dad were always super careful not to let slip anything about my sexuality to the neighbors so they wouldn't get weird about it. Amanda might not feel comfortable talking about what she's attracted to.

Although I thoroughly understand why you're worried about us, please don't put down your struggles, Daphne! I couldn't imagine being trapped at school having to stand by and do nothing while other people get hurt. Your troubles may be different from ours, but it doesn't make them insignificant.

Stay strong, everyone!

Kevin

Hate to say it, Cho, but I think Kevin has a point. Noel once told me that they only felt comfortable labeling themselves the way they do after they went to Hogwarts, and I don't really blame them, honestly – I don't think I've ever met a non-binary person before Noel, so I reckon it's not easy for them to be open about who they are. And gay men and lesbians aren't even allowed to marry in the Muggle world, at least here in the UK – I don't know about the United States...

Still, it'd be awesome if Amanda and Marietta got to meet sometime, even if it's just as friends! It's so cool that you and your new roommate are getting along so well, Cho!

xoxoxo

Rose

September 12, 1997

Interestingly, despite how much my tutors insisted that witches should only marry wizards, Father and Mother have always been kind of flippant about the whole thing. One time Father even represented two married wizards in front of the Wizengamot when one had broken his family's marriage contract. Then again, the large amount of Galleons they offered him to represent them might have helped sway him...

I understand that you want to pair off your friends, Cho, but keep in mind that just because Amanda hasn't shown interest in men doesn't necessarily mean she's into women either.

MB

September 18, 1997

Alecto Carrow is truly horrible! Today she started our class by arguing that in the beginning, wizards and witches were the "dominant" species, only to lose their godlike status through breeding with and living alongside Muggles – and so it's only right that, in order to "restore our magic to the way it was," we must "prune our society of sponges" and "only encourage unions that promote proper magical blood." I can't believe anyone could believe something so horribly untrue: yes, witches and wizards might have used magic openly in the past, but we went underground to promote peace between us and the Muggles, not because we were weakened through interacting with them! It was our choice, and it wasn't made out of desperation, it was made of common sense!

I was so angry listening to her go on, but Neville was angrier still. When Alecto brought up the necessity of "cultivating" the next generation of magical children, he asked her if the Ministry would be setting the Smith-Clearwaters free and giving them back their son. Even if Alecto hexed him in the face afterwards, I've never been so proud of Neville in all my life! It's so strange sometimes thinking back on how quiet and unassuming he was when we were younger, when you see him now! He's grown so much...

Ron, we haven't heard from you in a few weeks – how are you doing? How are Harry and Hermione?

Please be safe, everyone!

Love,

Hannah

September 19, 1997

Hannah,

That “theory” of Alecto’s is unfortunately something often circulated by blood purists – Uncle Hyperion told us that he, Mother, and the rest of their siblings were taught the same nonsense when they were children, though of course Uncle Hyperion found out later how baseless the claim was and gave Astoria and me a proper course in wizarding history. I must agree about Longbottom, though: I wouldn’t have thought he had that kind ofchutzpah in him.

I’m enclosing some of my favorite perfume (wild rose) on the base of the page. I hope that the scent can freshen up some of those rooms that might be a bit on the stuffier side.

Love from

Daphne

September 22, 1997

Here’s a picture of Mr. Whiskers and Darcy for all of you! Beau was nice enough to get them some new cat toys; Mr. Whiskers is still terrified of his little catnip mouse, but Darcy loves his (and Mr. Whiskers’s too!). At one point Darcy actually threw his mouse across the room so he could chase it, which scared Mr. Whiskers so badly he scampered under Mr. Malfoy’s bed, and Noel was laughing so hard! Noel always seems so composed, so it was really nice to see them let their hair down a little.

I love you all!

xoxoxo

Rose

Dear Rose,

I'm so, so glad that Noel is with you throughout all this. From the time I first met them, they've always been so private and close-to-the-vest – even during Quidditch practice, they would always go off and perfect flying techniques on their own, rather than let me or anyone else on our team help. I have a feeling Noel never really had a lot of friends before they joined the Ravenclaw team. But who knows, maybe with you there, you might be able to coax them out of their shell!

Ron, if I remember correctly, it was Granger's birthday a few days ago, right? Were you able to do anything for it?

Amanda has a few auditions coming up these next two weeks, so everyone, please wish her "broken legs!" (It's bad luck to say "good luck" to any sort of performer, so you always tell them to "break a leg" instead.)

Love,

Cho

September 26, 1997

My phoenix cake is finished! It's an apple cinnamon cake, and I even added some spicy red candies in my batter to give it a bit of a bite. I used apple peels and red frosting for the feathers, modeling chocolate for the talons and eyes, and a chopped cantaloupe for the beak. It may not be perfect, but I hope my next project – a full-size pumpkin spice cake shaped like a Jack-O-Lantern – will be even better!

Miss you all!

Kevin

Your cake looks amazing, Kevin! I showed the picture to Ernie and Susan, and they were both thoroughly impressed too. I can't wait for your October cake!

Love,

Hannah

Kevin, as always, your cakes astound me! It's so beautiful – I wouldn't have the heart to eat a bite of it.

Love from

Astoria

September 27, 1997

Your cakes are truly a work of art, Kevin. I almost wonder if you could make a living making specialty cakes! I must disagree with Stori, though; I would frankly love to try it myself! I am thoroughly intrigued by the spicy candies in your cake batter.

Regards,

Arjuna

September 30, 1997

Guys, I'm worried: we haven't heard from Ron in weeks now, ever since what happened to Bridget at the Ministry. Ron, as soon as you can, please write something? Just a few words will do! At least tell us you're okay, even if everything is "same old, same old!"

In the meantime, here's a picture of Dennis and me at the park near our house! As you can see, the wind's picking up a little: there are these really nice fir trees around, so it already smells like Christmas even though it's still only September!

Cheers!

Colin

I'm fine. Just not much to write about.

Ron

We're glad you're okay, Ron. I know it can be very difficult being in hiding, thinking of things to say. If it helps, you can always just write about the little things, like what the weather's like, or even just a nice memory that ran through your head. Like the other day, the leaves started falling from the tree outside our cabin, and I thought of the nice hot pumpkin juice that the house elves would make for us back at school. Astoria, Millicent, Hannah, and Daphne, if they've made it again this year, please drink some for me!

Kevin

October 1, 1997

Everyone –

Detention with the Carrows is worse than we could've imagined. Amycus started class with the seventh years today by bringing in a line of first year students and announcing that we would be learning how to use the Cruciatus Curse by using them as targets.

*Yes. These kids who had been assigned detention were brought into our class for **target practice**.*

MB

Adding onto Millicent's letter –

Amycus had us go down the row and curse the first year placed in front of us. Most of us couldn't

cast it very well, since we really didn't want to hurt them – the most damage we inflicted was like a slap to the face, and even that was too much! The girl in front of me was crying and shaking so badly that I couldn't keep myself from crying too, and Amycus got so mad that he blasted me across the room and yelled at the entire class before cursing the girl himself! Her screams were just awful. They hurt so much, I couldn't help it; I just crumpled up in a ball and cried. I couldn't even move until Ernie and Susan picked me up and walked me to the Hospital Wing.

Hannah

To add on as well...

One silver lining is that just about no one managed to cast the curse effectively. The few who actually looked like they wanted to inflict that sort of pain, like Vincent and Gregory, weren't magically gifted enough to pull it off in their first attempt. Even Pansy looked a bit reluctant; she tried more than most, but the shrillness of the first years' screams was bothering her. She kept muttering to me about how much she wished they would shut up and stop crying. The only person who seemed to manage all right was Draco, and I suspect that's because his "Aunt Bellatrix" trained him in the Cruciatus Cur

Creak.

Daphne stopped abruptly, closing her scrapbook with a quick *snap* as she looked up.

A slender figure with a pale, pointed face and dressed in a burgundy cashmere robe and black pants had appeared at the top of the stairs.

Daphne feigned casualness as best as she was able.

"Draco," she said dryly. "You startled me."

Draco's eyes ran over Daphne in the black leather armchair by the fire, over the rest of the abandoned common room, and then down onto the pearl white scrapbook in her hands. His

expression was unreadable, but scrutinizing.

“Is there a particular reason you’re writing in an empty commonroom with the lights off?”

Daphne’s dark eyes narrowed slightly.

“We all need our privacy, sometimes,” she shot back coolly.

“I would think you’d find more privacy in your dorm,” said Draco quietly, “unless you’re worried Pansy might read something *unsavory* over your shoulder.”

Daphne smirked coldly at him, her eyes flashing unpleasantly, as she rose to her feet.

“You have some nerve insinuating that I would keep secrets from my best friend,” she hissed, “particularly when I’m not the one toying with her affections out of some selfish attempt to stay in the past. Don’t you *dare* deny it,” she snapped when Draco gave a slight flinch, “I know you don’t love Pansy – I doubt you have the capacity to love at all, given that you’ve likely never sacrificed anything for anyone in your entire life – ”

In a flash Draco strode right up to Daphne, sticking his wand right up against her throat.

“Don’t you *dare*,” he snarled under his breath, “say I’ve never sacrificed anything. I lost my reputation – my identity, my innocence – I lost my *father* to the Dark Lord’s service. I’ve lost a *hell* of a lot more than you’ll ever lose, because your family’s too cowardly to even take sides.”

Amazingly Daphne didn’t even flinch in response to Draco’s anger. Instead she merely glared right back at him, standing tall even though he towered over her and her white silk nightgown made her look more delicate than she actually was.

“I never said you haven’t lost anything,” she answered coldly. “I said you’ve never *sacrificed*. You chose to join the Dark Lord because you believed in his cause – getting cold feet later but sticking around anyway isn’t noble. You lost your innocence because the world made you *grow the Hell up* – you were forced to by circumstance, it wasn’t a choice on your part. You would go right back to the way you were if you had the chance, no matter how selfish that would be. Your father put himself on the line to protect you and your mother – it was a sacrifice on *his* part, not on yours.”

Daphne tossed her long dark hair over her shoulder coolly.

“As for my family, we *did* take a side – *our* side – even if that meant sacrificing a bit of our reputation with other pureblood families. Even if it meant sacrificing his pride and lust for glory, my father chose our family. Even if it means sacrificing my safety...I've decided to stand by my sister, regardless of her reputation as a Muggle sympathizer.”

The mention of Astoria made Draco's gaze fall to the floor. Daphne settled back down into the armchair, sitting as straight as a queen with her scrapbook in her lap.

“Love is putting someone else's needs before yours,” she said darkly. “I don't think you could even *fathom* such a thing, Draco Malfoy.”

There was an echoing silence. Daphne shifted her scrapbook in her lap, turning to face the fire and away from Draco.

“I can't. But I've seen it.”

Daphne looked up out the side of her eye at Draco. His gaze was also drawn to the fire.

“I've seen that kind of behavior – putting someone else's needs before yours,” he said very quietly. “Putting yourself in danger, just to save someone's life – even if you owe that person nothing, even if you can't expect anything in return – doing it anyway, just because someone needs your help.”

Daphne frowned, her eyebrows furrowing slightly. The flames flickered over Draco's unreadable gray eyes and his sickly pale face.

“I've seen it,” he said, “but I don't understand it, however much I'd like to. I don't even know what you'd *call* it – it's not love, it's not being nice, it's...I don't even know what.”

Daphne considered Draco, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully. Her fingers ran idly over the cover of her scrapbook as she bit the inside of her cheek.

“...Selflessness,” she said at last. “Offering help to someone else while expecting nothing in return...sounds like selflessness.”

Draco looked up at Daphne. It was almost frustrating how unreadable his expression was as he slowly walked across the room and settled himself down in a chair across from hers. His posture was much less straight as he slouched against the black leather arm of the chair, resting his elbow on his knee and propping up his head with his hand.

“Do you have any experience with selflessness?”

Daphne smiled wryly. “Very little. I’m a Slytherin too, remember?”

Draco actually smirked a bit too despite himself.

“Your sister does, though,” he said after a moment.

Daphne blinked. Draco leaned back against the side of his chair, propping his legs up on the opposite arm and bringing his arms up behind his head.

“When I was in the Hospital Wing, she dropped off some of your notes to me,” he explained lowly, looking down at the rug at his feet. “Even though I was a jerk to her, she said she was sorry I’d gotten hurt. She even said...she didn’t think anybody deserved what I went through... *‘not even a Death Eater.’*”

His last words were a mumble Daphne just barely made out. She stared at Draco for a moment; then, turning away, she smiled with slight fondness.

“...That does sound like Astoria.”

Draco looked at Daphne out the corner of his eye.

“...I didn’t just get back with Pansy because I wanted things to go back to the way they were,” he said. His flurry of speech made him sound a little more like his old self, but it still came across as more thoughtful than usual. “I mean, yeah, do I wish we could go back to those times before we

had to be scared – when all we had to focus on was messing with Potter’s gang and winning the Quidditch Cup? Sure – those times were great, they were simple, they were – normal. But that wasn’t the only reason, it was also...I just didn’t know how to tell Pansy...how to explain...how *different* everything is now...how different *I* am. I mean, Hell, *I* barely know who I even am now – how can I explain what I don’t even know? And I guess...the thought that maybe I *could* be that person I was before – be happy...even in that world that wasn’t as real as I thought it was...”

His voice trailed off, but Daphne thought she understood. It was selfishness that had driven Draco, sure, but it was an understandable selfishness. He wanted to be happy again – even if that meant burying his head in the sand or going along with the Carrows’ whims, he wanted to be happy. The only problem was that when he tried to do those things, they didn’t bring back the same level of cruel, bullying joy he might’ve felt in the past, because in his heart he knew he wasn’t that person anymore. His whole worldview had been upset so dramatically that trying to follow in his father’s old footsteps now felt like going through the motions.

“Seems to me that if your old ways aren’t working out for you, you might need to try something new,” said Daphne.

Draco frowned. “Like what?”

“Well...you said you wanted to understand selflessness. Maybe that desire’s trying to tell you something.”

“You think I should become some mewling goody-two-shoes?” said Draco, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

“I never said that,” said Daphne amusedly. “You really should stop putting words in my mouth and actually *listen* for a change.”

Draco scoffed. Daphne chuckled quietly under her breath despite herself as she got up, tucking her scrapbook under her arm as she headed for the staircase down to the dorms.

“I’m not saying don’t look after yourself – self-preservation is not only one of our house values, but it’s essential in this time and place. But if your heart’s no longer in being the way you were, all you can do is listen to it and try to figure out who you might want to be instead.”

Draco watched Daphne go, his gray eyes rippling with thought. When she was out of sight, he

transferred his gaze to the darkness ahead, letting his mind wander.

Who he might want to be instead...what did that even *mean*? He'd wanted to be who he was, but when he'd tried, he found that he couldn't do it...

But...maybe that was it, wasn't it? He couldn't be who he was, no matter how much he'd wanted to be that person – what if that was because...he *hadn't* really wanted to be that person again? If he had been the way he was before – happy, confident – stupid – on top of the world – then he'd only be going back to being blind...ignoring that the Dark Lord wasn't as great as he'd always been taught, deluding himself into believing that his family would be at the upper echelons of the new world order...

He'd be a boy – a child – too stupid to understand, too arrogant to see the truth – that he could *never* stand alongside the men his father had joined so long ago – that he could *never* be one of them – and worse, that he shouldn't *want* to be one of them...

The memory of Nagini the snake bearing down upon Charity Burbage's dismembered corpse on the dining table at Malfoy Manor rippled through Draco's mind, making him fight back the instinct to gag.

He was afraid. He'd wanted to go back to the way he was because he was scared, and he wanted to stop being scared. He wanted to stop worrying, stop flinching, and stop cowering. He wanted...to stop *hating* himself, to...stop feeling so alone...

"Draco, you don't have to – "

"I've got it."

The image of Gordon Ramsay's concerned face rippled through Draco's mind, making him straighten up slightly in his chair.

Selflessness. That was what Daphne had called it. It sounded about right to Draco's ears – selflessness was foreign to him, and what Ramsay had done was certainly that. Ramsay saving Mr. Malfoy's life and helping him hide from the Dark Lord had shaken Draco to his core – the behavior was so surprising and so *decent* that the young Slytherin couldn't help but admire Ramsay for it, however bizarre it seemed to him. Putting oneself in danger to save another man's life seemed like it should've been an expression of *weakness*, but instead it had made Ramsay seem

infinitely more powerful than either of Draco's parents. Ramsay had been so assured in his convictions and so determined to help that it had placed him on a level overlooking the suspicious, cynical people he'd decided to help. It made Draco wish, in some dark, hidden part of himself, that he might someday understand why Ramsay and his fiancée chose to help Mr. Malfoy that night – why they chose to trust a boy who had been chosen by the Dark Lord to betray Hogwarts to the Death Eaters.

Draco knew that he would have to keep up the ruse he'd been playing to avoid suspicion from the Carrows...but Daphne's words, and the memory of Ramsay and Astoria, had gotten him thinking: what if his heart wasn't in being who he used to be...because he wanted to be someone else - someone wiser, someone stronger...someone *better*?

Still Recruiting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

October 2, 1997

Today someone tagged the wall just outside the Great Hall with the words “Dumbledore’s Army still recruiting” in glowing bright red letters. Snape was furious when he saw it, but oh, I’ve never been more comforted by graffiti in my entire life!

Anyway, later on, I talked to Neville about it, since I’d figured he probably knew who was behind it, and although he didn’t say so outright, he pretty much confirmed my suspicions. He mentioned our last Defense Against the Dark Arts class and said that Amycus had gone too far for him to just stand back and do nothing. Ron, you wouldn’t believe how much Harry, Hermione, and you have rubbed off on him – I swear, the gleam in his eye made him look utterly fearless! I’m really looking forward to fighting back, though, even if it’s just in small ways! I’m so glad that even with a fraction of our old numbers, Dumbledore’s Army will still be there to stand up against injustice!

Please stay safe, everyone!

Love,

Hannah

October 3, 1997

Oh Hannah, I’m so glad Dumbledore’s Army is up and running again! I’m sure you all at Hogwarts could use it more than ever: I never in a million years thought I’d hear of anyone worse at teaching than Professor Umbridge, but the Carrows certainly are up there!

In other news, Amanda rocked all of her auditions! I was really proud of how well she did, considering how talented her competition was. I had no concept of how technical these sorts of auditions were before now, but you really have to work hard to even approach the level of these people auditioning, and most of them won’t even be cast at all!

Here’s a picture I took of Amanda and me in Madison Square Garden after one of her auditions. I insisted that I buy Amanda a hot dog after such a long day and after a lot of prodding, she finally agreed, as long as they were chili dogs and I got one too. I was pleasantly surprised by how it tasted, really – it’s never going to be a favorite of mine, of course, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as it looked.

I also tuned into Potterwatch last night, as soon as I was able to get back to my room and close the

door. No news of Bridget, but River read a note from the Abraxans declaring that they will discover the truth for the sake of the friends and family of those people whose files are missing. Rodent's report on "old Morty's" doings made me laugh so hard too – Ron, your brother really is something!

Next broadcast will be on November 10, and the password is "Bagnold!"

Lots of love to all of you!

Cho

You're right – that thing does look disgusting. Glad it didn't taste the way it looks.

MB

Millicent – hot dogs are very popular in the Muggle world (though they are American Muggle food more than anything, you're more likely to see sausage rolls around here). Professor Ramsay even put his own recipe for chili dogs in one of his cookbooks, though the one you and Amanda got, Cho, is probably of lesser quality. But I'm assuming you got it from the food truck behind you, so perhaps that's to be expected.

Take care, everyone!

Regards,

Arjuna

October 6, 1997

Amycus ended our class today by assigning us an oral report regarding the threat Muggles pose to a pureblood society. He recommended that we refer to the works of Barrett Fay for our research, and as you can expect, Barrett Fay's version of history is absolute rubbish. When I asked Madame Pince about him, she looked close to murderous. She led me over to where his books were shelved, and as she took out each one and put it down on the table, she muttered something like "bullocks" or "tripe" under her breath. Reading the titles, I can't say I blame her – I mean, don't you just cringe at the thought of books called When Muggles Attack, The Muggle Menace, and How Bad Could It Be?: The History of Mudblood Integration? If Uncle Hyperion were here, I'm sure he'd be just as furious as Madame Pince is; even though he's interested in just about everything, history is one of his biggest passions. He even liked Professor Binns' class when he was at school!

I really miss you right now, R.J. – the fifth year Ravenclaw girls' dorm has been so very, very quiet lately. The only other girl here is Hilary Erskine, and given how open she was to Uric Cuffe's nonsense last year, I have little interest in talking to her. I'm just glad I have Wagtail: I think he's noticed how gloomy I've been, as he's been sleeping by our window instead of in the owlery and keeps leaving dead mice on my pillow.

Kevin, Ron, Colin, Rose, Cho, I miss you all too. Please stay safe, wherever you are.

Love from

Astoria

I miss you so much too, Stori! Thinking of you having to deal with that creep Amycus by yourself – I'd have it in my mind to put out a proper oral report, one with actual history, but I realize it wouldn't be prudent to needlessly provoke a mantichore like that. Even if you must spew nonsense to get a decent grade, Stori, there's nothing saying you have to show any conviction in it, let alone believe it. At least you know the truth, even if it's not particularly popular at the moment.

Stay strong,

Arjuna

I know it can be difficult being alone, Astoria. Just remember, when you're feeling down, you're never truly alone as long as there are people out there in the world who love you...and I know you, at least, will never go without those.

Right now I'm experimenting with baking a cake in a spherical shape, so that I can carve it more like an actual pumpkin. Wish me luck – if this works, then maybe I'll be able to have my October cake ready earlier than expected!

Kevin

October 9, 1997

AMANDA GOT A PART!

She'll be a principle dancer and understudy for the lead role in a show called (I'm not even kidding) "The Wizard of Oz!" It's apparently based off of a really popular Muggle movie, where a Muggle girl named Dorothy falls into this magical land ruled by a wizard, two good witches, and two evil witches. One of the other singers at the audition – this guy named Eduardo – is the understudy for the "Scarecrow," who from what I gather is also an important part. At the audition Eduardo overheard Amanda asking me about how I'd never heard of The Wizard of Oz before, and he said he'd only seen it as a teenager, when he was lucky enough to catch a rerun of it on TV (standard abbreviation for "television," for those of you who didn't take Muggle Studies). He's originally from Puerto Rico, so he saw it in Spanish originally – he sang a piece of one of the songs for us, and it was really quite pretty! Amanda says she's looking forward to working with him. She's also going to try to rent The Wizard of Oz so we can watch it together sometime soon, so I can get an idea of what the show's going to look like. There'll be more music and dancing, of course, but I'm looking forward to it all the same!

Love,

Cho

Ooh, I love The Wizard of Oz!! That's so cool that Amanda's going to get to play Dorothy, even it's just as a back-up...she's so, so lucky!

*I helped Beau make Chicken Marsala for dinner tonight, and guess what? **Mr. Malfoy cleared his***

***plate.** Sorry, I just had to share that with someone – it made me grin so big, even if I didn't want to explain why to Mr. Malfoy!!*

xoxoxo

Rose

When Mother, Father, Astoria, and I used to attend Mrs. Malfoy's yearly Christmas functions, the Malfoys used to switch up the dishes, but they always included turkey with chestnut and apple filling as one of the main courses and a chocolate Yule Log with hazelnut frosting. If you're trying to get a positive reaction from Mr. Malfoy again, Rose, perhaps you should try something with those flavors.

As a side, Astoria, please be careful around Amicus. He doesn't know a thing about personal boundaries, and I don't much care for the thought that he might slip up behind you and whisper things in your ear before you have the chance to get away.

Love from

Daphne

October 12, 1997

Dennis's school is organizing a Halloween dance! It's kind of weird, honestly: Halloween isn't as big of a deal in the Muggle world as it is in the Wizarding World, at least here in the UK, but apparently the teachers wanted to "organize an event where the students could mingle and socialize in a safe, festive environment." (Basically they want everyone to go to the dance, rather than run around the neighborhood causing trouble.) Dennis is excited, though...as he said, he'll actually be able to wear his dress robes and pointed hat without looking silly! I'm a bit jealous: I think all I can look forward to on Halloween are a bunch of drunken customers at work...

Here are some pictures I took of the changing leaves! I made some homemade apple cider for Dad's, Dennis's, and my lunches this week to celebrate the fall colors, even though mine is nothing compared to the cider the elves at Hogwarts like to make.

Cheers!

Colin

October 13, 1997

Just finished watching The Wizard of Oz with Amanda and Eduardo! (Or “Lalo,” as he’s said it’s okay to call him – don’t ask me how that’s short for “Eduardo,” but it’s kind of sweet, isn’t it?) Anyway, it was quite a lovely movie, even though the Muggle understanding of magic was pretty silly – I mean, if the ruby slippers were a Portkey, then they’d only be able to activate at a certain time, not with an incantation. But I guess I really shouldn’t overanalyze something like that. Cedric used to say that some things are just meant to be felt, not rationalized...I guess this is just one of those things.

In any case, Lalo is really quite nice. When he heard I liked to draw, he asked if he could see some of my artwork, and when I fetched my sketchbook from my apartment, he spent a good chunk of the movie just flipping through it! He looked over each one super carefully, even the drawings I wasn’t happy with, and said that I had a lot of talent. I wouldn’t go that far, but it was still nice to hear. I hope Amanda, he, and I will be able to hang out again some time.

Hope you’re all well!

Love,

Cho

You do have a lot of talent, Cho! I’ve always loved your drawings, even the silly ones – they’re so expressive.

Stay safe, everyone! I love you all.

Hannah

October 16, 1997

Dumbledore's Army has struck again. Longbottom, Lovegood, and Ginny Weasley were caught sneaking into the Headmaster's office, and Snape assigned them detention in the Forbidden Forest with Hagrid. Considering the Carrows' usual detention methods, I figure they got off lucky.

MB

Arjuna closed her dark blue scrapbook with a quiet *snap*, her gaze drifting over to the clock on her bedside table.

1:21 AM.

Mr. Belaji had been arriving home later and later every night, only to get up at the same early hour every morning. Admittedly he couldn't spend that much time there anyway – after all, one of the main rules regarding a Secret Keeper and their safe house was that the Secret Keeper could never call the house “home.” Mr. Belaji had even left all of his belongings in their old house, where the Ministry still believed the Belaji family lived. Still, he'd afforded himself a short night's sleep and breakfast with his wife and daughter before heading out in the past; now...well, Arjuna almost never saw him anymore.

Finally, at long last, Arjuna heard a familiar set of footsteps climbing the stairs. She stilled, waiting and listening, as they quietly walked past her room. A moment later they were followed by the quiet sound of a door closing.

Arjuna quickly climbed out of bed, snatched up her schoolbag, and sneaked out of her bedroom and into the hall. She was still fully dressed in a dark blue turtleneck dress, a black belt, white tights, and brown boots as she crept down the stairs into the kitchen.

There on the dining table were Mr. Belaji's things – his wallet, house keys, and his standard, Ministry-assigned Invisibility Cloak – all things he wouldn't need until 6:00 that morning.

Tucking her wand under her belt, Arjuna snatched up the Invisibility Cloak and fastened it securely around her shoulders, before quietly darting out of the house.

Strolling just outside the door in pacing circles was a young man dressed in scarlet robes with bright hazel eyes. Arjuna came right up beside him, tapping his shoulder while still unseen under her Cloak.

“It’s me,” she whispered.

“About time,” Eddie Carmichael muttered back to her with a tired grin. “I was wondering if your father had decided to sleep in his office!”

Eddie put out his arm and Arjuna grabbed hold of it. In a second, both of them had Disappeared into the night with a *CRACK*.

Eddie and the invisible Arjuna arrived in the courtyard of a beautiful old university made entirely of scarlet bricks, just in front of the portly, yet beautiful statue of a queen. The campus was deserted: no doubt any students and faculty had left hours before.

Immediately Eddie and Arjuna set off at a brisk walk through the open archway at the front of the grounds, taking a left through a large meadow. Just past the meadow in the woods beyond they found a very tiny, narrow bridge. Eddie started across, and despite her misgivings, Arjuna tentatively followed. The bridge wobbled a bit under their combined weight, and Arjuna threw her left arm up in a desperate attempt to help her balance.

“Eddie – ” she muttered under her breath with a frown, “this doesn’t seem – very *stable* – ”

Eddie smiled over his shoulder at the nothingness that obscured Arjuna.

“That’s on purpose,” he said lowly. “Roger and Taylor thought it’d be a good way to deter nosy Muggles – hell, there *is* a school right over there, you know...”

They reached the other side, and Eddie let Arjuna grip his shoulder for support as she climbed down to the ground.

“You can take the Cloak off now – we’re here.”

Sliding the hood and then the rest of the cloak off, Arjuna looked through the darkness confusedly. There was nothing there...yet...

“It’s hidden, isn’t it?” she asked.

Eddie turned to the open field, his eyes and grin both gleaming.

“This is the hidden sanctuary for winged horses.”

Those words no doubt being the Secret Eddie had been entrusted with, Arjuna watched in amazement as out of the darkness, a little cottage was suddenly built, brick by brick, from the ground up, until it was fully revealed before her eyes. It was a sweet home as red as the university behind them with pretty white shutters and a matching wood roof.

Eddie turned to Arjuna, his eyebrows raised high in a kind of handsome smugness.

“Welcome, R.J., to 1197 Hollow Way.”

Only a moment later, the door opened, to reveal Roger Davies on the front stoop. The once-Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain was as dashing as ever, with dark bangs and ears that were about half a size too large for his pale, handsome face. He was dressed in forest green robes with a high black collar over a pair of black slacks and matching boots.

“Eddie! Arjuna!”

He hurried out to meet them. His blue eyes were narrowed slightly, painting a very solemn look on his face, as he brought a hand onto both of their shoulders and used the grip to steer them toward the front door.

“Come inside – I just found out some new information about those missing files – ”

“Bridget’s file?” said Arjuna, straightening up at once.

“Yes,” said Roger.

Releasing their shoulders momentarily so he could close the front door behind them, he then strolled quickly into the sitting room without waiting to see if Arjuna and Eddie were following along behind. Fortunately, they were.

The sitting room was filled with what looked like hand-me-downs – no piece of furniture or art matched anything else in the space. The couch was white and frilly with pink flowers printed all over it, while the armchair to the left of it was made of rather distressed brown leather. The coffee table looked like it had once been a barn door that had been “upcycled” into a small table, and it was covered in *Witch Weekly* magazines and unsorted *Daily Prophet* clippings. There were glass cabinets filled with knick-knacks, including several miniature brooms that flew in circles around the other objects on the shelf, as well as a rather clunky-looking, violet-colored printing press covered with a forest green tablecloth in the corner.

Roger immediately settled himself in the brown leather armchair, which was so low that he had to lean forward in his seat to sit upright. His arms rested on his knees and his hands came together, the fingers interlacing as they rested over his lips.

“I was walking down the hall back to my office after lunch,” he explained, as Arjuna and Eddie slowly sat down on the couch, “when I overheard our new *Chief Editor* gabbing it up with his future father-in-law, Etienne Montmercy. Apparently the Senior Undersecretary knows all about the missing files, because he was there when Antonin Dolohov decided to move them.”

“*Dolohov?*” Eddie said sharply.

“Why would the Head of the Auror Department move a set of files out of the MASTIF archives?” asked Arjuna, frowning deeply. “MASTIF is *part* of the Auror Department.”

“I don’t know,” said Roger. “All Montmercy said was that he thought the files ‘*would be of more use to the Unspeakables.*’”

Arjuna stiffened sharply. Eddie turned to her, his eyes narrowing.

“What could the Department of Mysteries want with the files of Muggle-born witches and wizards?” he murmured.

“*Nothing!*” Arjuna said insistently. “Their whole purpose is to research the mysteries of the Wizarding World! They’re investigators and historians – *scholars!* They’d have no reason to hurt Muggle-borns!”

Eddie and Roger looked at Arjuna with something not unlike pity.

“Don’t forget, Arjuna,” said Roger gently, “the Ministry of Magic has been corrupted from the inside-out, all parts of it. The *Prophet*, too. The Death Eaters control it all, and they have every intention of having everyone work for *them*, regardless of their original purpose.”

“And don’t forget,” Eddie added, his quiet tone rippling with self-righteous anger, “Marietta found that room in the Department of Mysteries transporting Muggle-borns to Azkaban. Their employees are toeing the party line – just as we’ve all had to.”

Arjuna’s protests died in her throat, leaving her sitting there silent, her mouth slightly open with dismay. Roger brought out a hand and rested it on Arjuna’s arm, squeezing it lightly.

“I know it’s troubling,” he said, “but it also gives us an idea of where to look next. And there’s a silver lining – Uric Cuffe mentioned Bridget by name.”

“*What?*” said Arjuna.

Roger grinned. “He remembered Bridget using wandless magic – I guess she was trying to protect Potter, Granger, and Weasley. He’d been thrown back against the wall along with the Aurors, and he recalled her being carried off as Dolohov told Yaxley and Umbridge to bring her file to his office – ”

“‘*Carried off?*’” repeated Arjuna, her blood running cold with dread. “Was she dead or alive?”

“All he said was ‘*carried off,*’” said Roger.

“That sounds like she was alive, then,” Eddie said eagerly.

Arjuna wasn’t so sure, though. The connotation certainly could make one *think* that was true...but Cuffe could’ve just meant that her *body* was carried off...

Refusing to follow the train of thought further, Arjuna glanced at the other two, her black eyes narrowing sharply.

“We need to find out more about this new archive at the Department of Mysteries – what it’s for and why it needs to be so top secret. Only then can we find out what happened to those missing people.”

“Do you think your father would have any ideas?” asked Roger. “He works at the Department of Mysteries.”

Arjuna frowned.

“...Perhaps,” she said slowly, “but he wouldn’t share what he knows or thinks. Papa *loves* his job, and he’d never go back on his oath of silence. Even if he wanted to talk about it, he wouldn’t, not even to Mama or me.”

Eddie crossed his arms, his expression turning more solemn. “Then you’ll just have to get the information another way.”

“Eddie,” Roger reproached him softly.

“What?” Eddie shot back. “It’s true! We’ve all had to go against our families a bit, to do what’s right. Both of my fathers, my aunt, my cousin, they’re all in the Auror Department too – you don’t think I haven’t kept some secrets from *them*? And what about you, Roger – sure, Taylor knows, but would your parents really be okay with you putting her and Roger, Jr. in danger with all this? Would *her* parents be okay with it?”

“*Carmichael*,” Arjuna said a little more sharply.

Eddie's face contorted with irritation. Roger considered Eddie for a moment, before exhaling quietly through his nose.

"You're right," he said diplomatically. "We've all had to go against our families' wishes, one way or another. It's just been the most logical thing to do, putting as few people in danger as possible, even if it means lying to the ones we love. But still, that's a choice *we* have to make. No one else can make it for us."

He looked at Arjuna out the side of his eye. Arjuna stared back at him for a moment; then her gaze fell to the floor.

"I don't think Papa would know anything," she said quietly. "Unspeakables don't talk about their missions, even with other Unspeakables. And any files Papa's in charge of would be locked up tight in our old house or in his office at work. I don't know if there's any way for me to get at them, or even if there's anything for me to find there at all..."

She gave a low sigh.

"...But...I'll try."

Eddie and Roger both smiled. Eddie reached out a hand and patted Arjuna lightly on the back, while Roger got up from his chair at last.

"I know you don't have much time tonight," said the ex-Quidditch Captain breezily, "but maybe you can jot down a quick paragraph about the files going to the Department of Mysteries too? Add it to the pamphlet draft you've got already, you know?"

He swept the forest green tablecloth off the printing press, making it cough gold sparks.

Arjuna smiled wryly. "That shouldn't be too hard."

She undid her school bag, taking out two pieces of parchment and handing them over to Roger. He scanned the words quickly, his blue eyes moving from one side of the paper to the other as he leaned up against the printing press.

“I wrote two opening paragraphs,” said Arjuna. “I figured you could just tell me which one you like better.”

Roger looked them both over. Then he extended a hand expectantly.

“Quill.”

Arjuna fished her Self-Inking quill out of her bag and handed it to him. Roger scribbled some notes in the margins of her draft, the tip of his tongue sticking out the side of his mouth as he worked.

“I’m going to try to combine them,” he explained. “Tell me how this sounds.”

He cleared his throat.

“This message goes out to all friends. Of whom, you may ask? Anyone, for any person who has been a friend to anyone else knows of the camaraderie, devotion, and empathy that define us as human. Perhaps evil can come out in large numbers, but it is not loyalty that binds them together. It is greed – it is cowardice – it is selfishness and corruption that pumps through their veins, a blackened, poisoned substitute for blood. A minion will crow another’s praises; a servant will follow another with lock-step obedience; but a friend will stand beside him as his equal, bring out the very best in him, and sacrifice their own safety to protect him. This is why I speak to you now, friends, for if you have the ability to see yourself in others – to fight for the good in all man – to love with all of your heart – then you have the ability to see the darkness of the world and the strength within to stand against it.

“I know you see the injustices of this world, all of its cruelties, all of its crimes, and I can see why it might be easy to turn away. It is all too much in too little time. The despair of the world has barraged you from all sides so much that you’ve been forced to numb yourself to the pain. But I urge you, my dear, human friend, to not deaden your tears. Your sorrow and pain, in response to others’ sorrow and pain, is the epitome of empathy. It proves that there is light in the world, because you have light within you. You have a brilliant, heroic spark inside of you that allows you to reach out and connect with others who likewise feel despondent and hopeless. You can be their beacon of light. You can be their guiding star – and in the process, save yourself.”

He looked up, his lips curled up in a soft smile. Arjuna smiled back.

“...Sounds good,” she said lightly.

Still smiling, Roger put down the two pieces of parchment on the side table and raised his wand, levitating wooden letters out of a box on the side of the printing press so he could set the type.

“You know, Arjuna, you’re awfully lucky I’ve never had much of an ego,” he laughed. “Otherwise the thought of a fifteen-year-old student outclassing *me*, a full-grown man who writes for the *Daily Prophet*, would be an insult.”

Chapter End Notes

The university Roger Davies's house is hidden beside is Royal Holloway, University of London - truly a beautiful campus!

Halloween

October 17, 1997

Millicent – is Ginny all right? Was she hurt? Please respond!

Ron

Don't worry, Ron: Ginny, Neville, and Luna are fine. Hagrid kept them safe, even if they had to go into the Forbidden Forest. I think Millicent's right; in a weird way, I think they were lucky Snape caught them, and not the Carrows...

The usual Jack-O-Lanterns have started going up around the school. I know this Halloween won't be nearly as much fun as the ones in the past, but at least all of the sweets and decorations should offer some slight cheer in this whole mess. I'll try to take some pictures if I can, but I'll have to be careful – I don't want the Carrows getting nosy about what I'm doing with them.

I love you all so much! Please stay safe.

Love,

Hannah

October 19, 1997

Oh, how I've missed those Hogwarts pumpkins!

It's funny how big Halloween is here in the U.S. – everyone goes all out, decorating their houses with fake cobwebs, gravestones, and skeletons. When I talked to Amanda about it, she laughed and said that people go even more overboard with Christmas decorations. If that's true, it must be a real spectacle, celebrating Christmas here in New York City!

Lalo invited us to a Halloween party at one of his friend's apartments in Greenwich Village, so Amanda and I went to a costume shop to pick up something to wear. (American Muggles tend to wear outlandish outfits for Halloween, sometimes scary, but sometimes just silly.) I was originally going to just follow Dennis's example and wear my usual dress robes, but Amanda needed to buy a costume, so I went with her, and at the shop I found the prettiest red trench coat and matching fedora, which Amanda told me was a costume for a character called "Carmen Sandiego," who I guess is some sort of fictional spy who steals treasures from around the world. So I guess I'm going to be her this Halloween! Amanda is going as Cher Horowitz, a character from this movie

called Clueless.

Miss you all so much!

Love,

Cho

Sounds like you'll have a lot of fun, Cho! Don't forget to take a whole bunch of pictures – I already made Dennis promise he'd take some with my camera, just for formality's sake.

Cheers!

Colin

October 21, 1997

I wonder if Amycus has any concept of just how unpleasant he is. During our oral reports, he kept interrupting everyone's presentations, adding comments and made-up arguments in the middle of points. He interrupted my presentation five times, mostly to tell me to smile more: I'm sure all of you would understand why I was reluctant to do so.

The other day I overheard some first years talking amongst themselves about Amycus's classes and worrying about how they were supposed to pass their exam, and I felt so awful. Those kids are still brand-new to Hogwarts and to Defense Against the Dark Arts in general, but thanks to that creep Amycus, they have effectively learned nothing these last two months. Honestly, I'm quite sure they won't learn anything this entire year, if nothing improves! It's just so frustrating!

Stay safe, everyone: I miss you.

Love from

Astoria

October 25, 1997

GUYS! I HAVE NEWS OF BRIDGET!

When Dad went to the closest town to pick up our usual groceries, he stumbled upon a few wizards. Fortunately they didn't seem to notice him, but they had to leave the store in a hurry and dropped some papers, including a copy of the Daily Prophet and a copy of the Abraxans' most recent pamphlet! The pamphlet mentions a lot of stuff we already knew, like the Muggle-Born Registration Commission and its dealings, but it also mentioned that several files – including Bridget's – were taken from the MASTIF archives and, on Head Auror Antonin Dolohov's orders, sent to a new archive in the Department of Mysteries! It also said that Bridget was "carried off" after you, Harry, and Hermione left, Ron! Nothing else was specified, but it really sounds like Bridget could still be alive! However small of a chance there might be of it, we need to hold onto it, no matter what.

Kevin

Kevin – I agree that we shouldn't give up all hope, but just remember, even if Bridget did survive the skirmish at the Ministry, that doesn't mean she's safe now. If the Ministry is being secretive enough about Bridget's fate that they're assigning it to the Department of Mysteries, things could be just as serious as they were before, if not more so.

MB

All the more reason to stay proactive in our faith – we'll just have to keep trying to find out the truth and do everything we can to act once that knowledge comes out. Bridget's a very resilient person, so all we can do is follow her example, and stay strong for her.

Regards,

Arjuna

October 30, 1997

My cake is finally finished! It took me longer than expected to figure out how to get the proper

shape for my cake so I could carve it properly, but I think this is my best one yet. As I said before, it's a pumpkin spice cake decorated with orange and light brown frosting, and as you can see, I was able to hollow out the center and put a small electric light inside! Dad was so thrilled when he saw it. He insisted on putting it in our window, even if no one else would be able to see it, just so that it could feel like the real Jack-O-Lanterns we used to carve at home.

Happy Halloween Eve, everyone!

Kevin

“Rose?”

The little Hufflepuff looked up from her scrapbook.

Noel had just come out from the hidden room they shared with Lucius Malfoy and into the office. Today they were dressed in a jean overall dress over a wrinkled white T-shirt and a pair of old, scuffed up white sneakers.

“Hi, Noel!” said Rose with a smile, leaning back slightly in the chair in front of the desk. “D’you want to see Kevin’s new cake?”

Closing the bookcase door behind them, Noel strolled over to Rose and propped themselves up on the top of the desk so they could better see the photograph taped into the enchanted scrapbook.

“Pretty great, right?” said Rose.

“Yeah,” Noel mumbled. Despite their lack of volume, they were clearly smiling.

Rose’s face spread into a larger grin.

“Kevin’s so clever – I mean, not only is the carving super good, but that light inside? It looks just like a real life Jack-O-Lantern! Except it probably tastes a lot better...ooh, maybe next time he makes this cake, he could make a *cheesecake* inspired frosting, that flavor would go great with

pumpkin...”

Noel glanced at Rose out the top of their hazel eye, considering her carefully for a moment.

“Rose...” they started slowly.

Rose tilted her head curiously. “Hmm?”

Noel took another minute to gather their thoughts before speaking again.

“...Do you...” they said, their tone very measured as if they were weighing every sentence incredibly carefully, “...do you ever hate being cooped up in here? In Beau’s house?”

Rose blinked in surprise.

“I don’t *hate* it exactly,” she said thoughtfully. “I mean, yeah, it’d be nice to go out, but it’s for our safety...”

“I know *why* we’re cooped up,” Noel said sharply. “But...well, are you okay with that? Do you ever...wish you *weren’t*?”

“Of course,” said Rose, a bit confused by the line of questioning.

Noel bit their lip, their eyes drifting away toward the ceiling as they considered their next words.

“...I wish it a lot,” they said at last. “Even though I know it’s not logical, I hate being trapped in here – not having the freedom to leave the house, to walk around outside...even just to stroll to the record store and listen to some samples for an hour or two.”

Rose frowned slightly. She put her scrapbook down on the desk, wrapping her arms around her knees.

"I get what you mean," she said quietly. "I mean...I miss going to the movies, and racing carts down the aisles at the supermarket...and I miss going out for ice cream. Dad always loved taking me to this one parlor by his house when he had some extra change."

Noel looked at Rose, an odd, almost excited glint forming in their hazel eye.

"...So I was thinking...it's Halloween coming up, right? People dress up like witches and wizards on Halloween – kids are allowed to walk the streets without their parents – no one would even look twice at two teenagers walking around at night alone."

Rose's eyes widened.

"You...want to sneak out?"

Noel looked a little nervous, even despite the excited, twitching smile on their lips.

"I've been thinking it all out this entire week," they said quickly. "Trudy always goes to bed right after dinner, and it doesn't seem like Beau really celebrates Halloween, so he'll probably treat tomorrow night like any other and be in bed by 9 so he can be up at dawn the next morning. And old *Lucy* tends to cloister himself away in our room as soon as dinner is over, so how would *he* know if we left the house? No one would have to know."

Rose bit her lip thoughtfully. "But...wouldn't it be *dangerous* for us to go out? I mean, if something happens, we wouldn't be able to use magic or anything..."

"We wouldn't be able to use our *wands*, yes," Noel corrected her. "But think about it – this is a Muggle neighborhood. No one would know we're not Muggles unless we actually used our wands, and what use would the Ministry have for two Muggle kids? And even if something *did* happen, I could always bring some of the stuff I bought from Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes with us...that stuff wouldn't set off the Trace. Then we could just hightail it back to the house, no problem!"

Even though the idea was a little risky, Rose actually felt herself getting into it. Not only did the prospect of getting out of the house for a night sound like fun, but also it was quiet, reserved *Noel* who had suggested it...and they seemed super excited about it!

"Okay...yeah!" she chirped. "Let's do it!"

Noel grinned from ear to ear, their eyes lighting up and their cheeks touched with a faint pink flush.

That night Rose and Noel smuggled the stuff they'd use for their "costumes" into the office, hiding the pieces away inside the dusty grand piano abandoned in the corner of the room. Then, on Halloween night, the two young teenagers waited until the others had all gone to bed, pretending that they were preoccupied in the dining room playing with Mr. Whiskers, Darcy, and Pogo. At the strike of 9, Rose and Noel fetched their stuff so they could change – Noel used the hall bathroom, while Rose stowed away in the hall closet next to it.

When Rose climbed out of the closet, fully dressed in her bare-shouldered lavender dress robes and white pointed hat, Noel was already waiting for her in the hall.

They looked – for lack of a better word – dashing. Noel's robes were dark blue with an elegant Mandarin collar and beautiful buttons secured with delicate gold chains. They accessorized with a pair of pencil-thin black slacks and a dark gold pointed hat with a wide brim and black embroidery resting a little off-center in their short hair.

Rose beamed. "You look wonderful, Noel!"

Noel seemed to be having trouble summoning a proper response. After a short moment, they looked down at the ground, their cheeks flushing in embarrassment.

"Nothing that special," they mumbled under their breath, "just figured it'd be a little less conspicuous than my other robes..."

Rose ignored Noel's deflecting, and instead moved forward to fix their hat.

"There you go! All straight now."

Noel mumbled something else self-consciously under their breath. Rose giggled.

“Come on!” she said brightly. “We’d better – whoops...”

Her white pointed hat flew right off her head and Noel had to snatch it out of mid-air.

“Don’t want to lose that,” they said with a slight smile.

“Yeah!” laughed Rose.

Noel’s eyes flickered from the hat in their hand to Rose’s dress thoughtfully. Then they smirked slightly and handed the hat back to her.

“Wait right there.”

They darted back into the office, leaving Rose alone and faintly confused. After a few minutes, Noel returned. In their hands was a purple sash covered in shiny gold stars.

“Put your hat back on.”

Rose obeyed. Without skipping a beat, Noel looped the sash around her white hat twice and then knotted the remaining long pieces together under Rose’s chin.

“There – how’s that?” asked Noel.

Rose went into the bathroom to look herself over in the mirror, and her eyes lit up.

“Oh, *Noel!*” she gasped in excitement, as she adjusted the hat slightly on her head and turned around slightly to better look at the ribbon. “It’s so pretty! Thank you!”

She immediately dashed over and gave them a hug, which made Noel avert their eyes to the floor.

“You can have it, if you want,” they mumbled.

“Really?” squeaked Rose.

“Sure,” said Noel, smiling despite their discomfort. “It’s from my other set of dress robes, but I usually don’t wear it as it’s the same pattern...and it goes with your robes, so...”

Rose grinned. “Thank you, Noel!”

She squeezed them in another huge hug, before she barreled over to the front door, completely unaware of just how scarlet Noel’s face had gotten.

“Come on! Let’s go to the record store – maybe if we’re lucky, they’ll still be open!”

Far away from the Suffolk neighborhood where Noel and Rose were hiding was a little white cabin hidden away in the Scottish highlands, where Kevin sat at the windowsill, gazing out at the darkness beyond with some concern in his long-lashed eyes.

Hattie Ollerton-Whitby had gone out into town that evening to pick up some cold and flu medicine for her husband Elijah, who was currently lying down in bed trying to sleep. The only problem was that she had left three hours ago now and had still not returned.

Kevin’s eyes flickered down to the teal scrapbook in his lap and then back up through the window.

He’d been trying to distract himself by looking over old entries and pictures, but he didn’t dare write any of his concerns about his mother down for his friends to read. Not only did he not want to give any steam to the anxiety clawing at his brain, but he also didn’t want to make his friends worry. Everything was scary enough for them right now, with Bridget still missing, the Carrows terrorizing Hogwarts, and the Death Eaters dominating the whole of the Wizarding World...

“Kevin?”

Kevin looked up as his father Elijah strode across the living room. His stubble-grazed face was paler than usual and his green eyes were concerned.

“Dad, you should be in bed – ” Kevin started.

Elijah silenced his son by resting a hand on top of his head and lightly ruffling his curly dark hair. Then he imitated Kevin and looked out the window at the dark grounds beyond.

“Your mother’s still not back yet?”

Kevin looked down at the sill so that Elijah couldn’t see the worry on his face.

“No...but I’m sure she’s okay,” he said reassuringly. “Maybe she decided to pick something else up at another store, one a little farther away.”

Elijah didn’t respond. Then, putting on a weak smile himself, he patted Kevin’s shoulder.

“...Maybe,” he granted. Sadly it didn’t sound like *he* believed it so much as he wanted *Kevin* to believe it.

Then, all of a sudden, both Elijah and Kevin straightened up.

There was movement outside the window, something moving out of the darkness. A robed shadow appeared – then a second, and a third –

‘*Wizards*,’ Kevin realized.

Elijah immediately pulled Kevin away, pulling the curtains shut over the front windows. Then he darted as quickly as he could to the master bedroom.

“Dad?” said Kevin anxiously.

Elijah returned a short moment later, cocking his revolver as he approached the front door.

“Kevin, I need you to stay out of sight,” he said sharply, his green eyes boring into him. “No matter what you hear, you *must not* let them see you – do you – ?”

WHAM!

All of a sudden, the front door was blasted off its hinges. Kevin jumped behind the couch to avoid the wood fragments that were thrown across the room, cradling his scrapbook close to his chest.

BANG! BANG, BANG!

Red and blue light from various spells flared around the room as gun shots were fired. Several knick-knacks on the bookcase in the hall were thrown to the floor with a *CRASH*.

Trembling from head to toe, Kevin tried desperately to stabilize his breathing – tried desperately to think.

His father had told him to stay out of sight – but how could he just sit back and do nothing – these men were *wizards* – not only that, there were at least *three* of them –

He looked down at the teal scrapbook under his arms and at the wand that always stuck out of his pocket. Neither of them could help – what about upstairs? Was there anything up there that could help – ?

CRASH!

Kevin flinched as a spell collided with the window, smashing the glass into a thousand pieces and spraying the debris across the floor. A moment later, Elijah gave a strangled cry of pain and something fell to the floor with a *clatter*.

‘*Dad!*’ Kevin thought, his heart flaring with panic.

He wanted to move, to bolt forward and help him, but he was frozen. His father told him not to move – but he couldn't just stay hidden! But he'd told him –*no!* He *couldn't* stay still – he *wouldn't* stay still – those men would *kill* him otherwise – !

“Don't resist,” said a measured, oddly calming voice. “We will not harm you, as long as you listen and do as we tell you.”

Kevin faltered.

“*“Not harm you?”*” he thought, confused. *‘But – but they’re Death Eaters – why would – ?’*

“Somehow I doubt that,” growled Elijah, “considering you just *broke into my house.*”

“We saw you quickly close the curtains,” another more shrill female voice shot back. “You were in the process of running away - you've forfeited any chance at righteous outrage - ”

“Arachne,” the first voice said in a quelling, yet still very calm voice. “Mind your tone.”

Kevin crept as quietly as he could across the wood floor. He needed to get a better look –

Unfortunately one of the steps he took was exactly the wrong one, as it prompted a low *creak*.

Everything tensed up within the house, silencing almost painfully. Kevin huddled in on himself, fear coursing through him – what had he done?!

“Ribbit.”

Kevin's blood chilled.

It was his toad, Wallace. Judging by the sound, the warty familiar had leapt out of the other room and past the couch Kevin was now hiding behind.

There was a silence. Then the first voice spoke again.

“Berach, check the other rooms – there may be other people hiding. Arachne, take our new *friend* on ahead to our camp...give him the chance to get to know his fellow soldiers.”

‘*Soldiers?*’ thought Kevin, his heart thumping with confusion and anxiety.

The word sparked something in his brain, wrangling an old memory from months and months ago – Katsuji’s face rippled over his brain, reciting nearly forgotten words.

“There’s this article about the Guild of Griffins – it’s this faction in the Wizengamot that believes that the boundary between the Muggle and Wizarding Worlds should be completely torn down – and about how their leader, Enrouge, has been pushing to create a private, all-Muggle army for the express purpose of defending the Ministry from perceived threats...”

‘*These men aren’t Death Eaters,*’ Kevin realized, ‘*they’re Guilders!*’

All of a sudden the couch was yanked aside. Kevin stumbled backward against the wall as he was faced with a wand alit with white light, being held by a young, dark-skinned man with a soft, oval-shaped face.

The two stared at each other for a long moment, Kevin frozen where he sat and the dark-skinned wizard standing stock-still. The man’s sharp-lidded eyes flickered down to the wand in Kevin’s jean pocket.

“...You’re a wizard,” he murmured.

Kevin’s face blanched.

“I’m – I’m Kevin – Kevin Whitby,” he stammered.

The man’s frame stiffened slightly. Kevin tried to put forward as brave of a face as he could, but his smile felt very fragile. He looked around for some sign of his father, but the woman called Arachne must have already dragged him off. The other wizard, Berach, must have already left the

room too.

“Where’s my dad?” whispered Kevin, his voice strained and tense with desperation. “Please – bring him back! I-I know you want him to fight You-Know-Who, but he’s not an Auror, he’s – ”

The Guilder raised his wand a little higher, and Kevin flinched. Instead of striking, however, he looked Kevin’s face over critically.

“...I remember your name,” he said very quietly. “You sent Ron a red velvet cake, while he was in St. Mungo’s...”

Kevin straightened up sharply. Then his long-lashed eyes slowly widened.

“...*Healer Jengu?*” he whispered in disbelief.

Jacques Jengu gave a very weak smile, but before he could respond, a voice rang out from the next room.

“Jacques? Found anything?”

“No!” Jengu shot back. “Keep looking!”

The Healer turned back to Kevin, his sharp-lidded eyes narrowed.

“Listen to me very carefully,” he said lowly, bending down to pick up Wallace with his non-wand hand. “It’s the Guild of Griffins’ policy to not let any witches or wizards interfere with our recruitment. If we also brought along the magical family members of the Muggles we recruit, then we could run the risk of them fighting back against us or, in the case of minors, activating the Trace and potentially exposing us all to the Ministry.”

“What – ?” Kevin started, horrified, but Jengu cut him off by slipping the toad into the Hufflepuff’s hands.

“You cannot save your parents, Kevin Whitby,” he whispered. “So you must run – run far away, and save yourself.”

Kevin looked up at the Healer, his eyes going very wide. He was starting to tremble, but it wasn’t just with terror anymore.

“...*No!*” he hissed, righteous fury coursing through him. “No, I won’t leave my mum and dad – ”

“Your mother already tried and failed to circumvent us, Kevin.”

Kevin blanched. Jengu stared him right in the face, his sharp-lidded eyes shockingly gentle despite the cruelty of his words.

“We collided in the woods outside town and we had to dispatch her while on our way to investigate your cabin. We hadn’t realized that she was actually trying to protect her family – and for that, I’m sorry. But don’t worry – your father won’t be harmed. We take good care of our soldiers – we’re not like the Death Eaters...”

“You – you monster!” whispered Kevin. He’d clenched his fists to try to steady them, but they only shook with more horror and anger. “You think in a million years that I would ever leave my dad in *your* hands? The hands of a murderer who justifies killing innocent people and ripping families apart with excuses about *how well you treat your victims?*”

Jengu was taken aback by Kevin’s anger. He was startled again, however, by Berach calling from the next room.

“Jacques! I found something!”

Jengu looked over his shoulder in the direction the voice came from to back down at Kevin. His sharp-lidded eyes narrowed solemnly.

“...Forgive me, Kevin,” he said very softly, “but I’ve already decided I won’t kill you...so you *will* leave your father tonight, and I’ll do what I have to in order to make sure you see reason.”

He raised his wand, pointing it right between Kevin's eyes.

"Obliviate."

Meanwhile, in the city of Glasgow, another Halloween celebration was underway. Dennis had been enjoying the festivities, dancing, drinking punch, and taking pictures with his brother's Muggle camera, and for a night, he was able to forget the entire world and the terror in it and just have fun.

At long last, at the stroke of midnight, the principal announced the end of the party and the students started heading out to their parents' cars. Dennis bid the girls he'd been hanging out with at the party goodbye and left the school to find Colin already waiting for him outside, still dressed in his branded collared shirt and worn black work slacks.

"How was everything?" asked Colin.

"Great!" said Dennis. "Took a bunch of pictures, just like you asked – "

"Good, then I can tape your pictures into my scrapbook when we get home..."

The two brothers skipped across the road together, turning the corner so that they could follow the pavement that led in a straight line toward their street. Dennis told Colin about the music chosen and the decorations, and even about the many compliments he'd gotten for his "costume."

" – This one girl, Bree – she's in the theatre club – kept going on and on about the materials," he said eagerly, a happy blush creeping up his cheeks. "She said I looked like a real wizard out of a fairy tale! It was so cool..."

Colin grinned broadly. "Sounds like you've got a new crush, then."

Dennis flushed. *"What?! No!"*

“Come off it, Dennis,” laughed Colin. “Just add her to the growing collection on your shelf – right along with Eleanor Bradstone and Madame Rosmerta and little Miss Flower Girl from primary school – ”

“Her name was *Aaliyah*,” Dennis shot back defensively, “but that was a long time ago – it doesn’t *mean* anything – ”

Colin laughed even louder.

All of a sudden, a pained, echoing cry shattered the peaceful air.

Colin and Dennis immediately straightened up. It had come from the playground just to the left of the pavement they’d been walking down. The two boys shot quick looks at each other, before they both charged forward, their hands reaching for the wands obscured in their respective pockets.

It was hard to see through the darkness. The fir trees around them rustled in the cool autumn wind whistling eerily in the night. Colin strained his ears, listening for another sound that could help him pinpoint where the first one had come from.

“Ribbit.”

Colin’s eyes shot down to the ground. There, at his feet, was an anxious-looking toad, which jumped up onto his foot and looked up at him with its big black eyes.

“A toad?” said Dennis in confusion.

It took Colin a second before his brown eyes widened in shock.

“*Wallace*,” he realized.

Wallace the toad, now that he knew he had Colin’s attention, leapt off his foot and back through the grass. Colin hurried after him, Dennis at his heels, until they reached a dark clearing just on the other side of the swings, where a body was lying in a heap.

“*KEVIN!*”

His teal T-shirt and jeans were covered in blood. He’d wrapped both of his arms around himself, but Colin quickly realized that his right hand had been torn off and there was a large scarlet gash slashing through his right arm. His freely bleeding arm was soaking the pages of the teal scrapbook he was hugging tightly against his chest as he cried and shuddered in pain.

Without hesitation Colin and Dennis dashed over to his side.

“*Kevin!*” cried Colin desperately. “Kevin, can you hear me?”

Kevin blinked up through his tears at Colin. His face was horribly pale to the point of being ill, but his long-lashed dark eyes twinkled with a weak attempt at hope.

“...C-Colin? Dennis...?”

Dennis whipped off his cloak and wrapped it around Kevin, trying to help him up. Kevin stumbled, but Colin was able to catch him and hoist him to his feet.

“It’s us, Kevin, we’re here,” Colin reassured him. “What happened?”

“G-Guilders,” said Kevin slowly, “they – they broke into the cabin – I just barely got out in time – I – I knew I couldn’t escape on foot, so – so I tried to remember your pictures – tried to imagine the Christmasy smell of the fir trees – even if they were still pictures, I could visualize myself being there – ”

Colin gaped.

“You – you Disapparated!”

Kevin’s wounds instantly made sense. He’d been Splinched; his hand must’ve gotten ripped off when he was trying to inexpertly transport himself to an unknown location!

“But what about your mum and dad?” asked Dennis. “Where are they?”

Kevin’s vague eyes suddenly looked confused.

“My mum and dad...?”

“Yeah!” said Dennis in concern. “Were they able to get out too?”

Kevin looked at the two Creevey brothers, disoriented and confused.

“I...have parents...?”

Ron's Fracture

As the moon started to set, Rose and Noel dashed back to Beau's house, the pockets of their dress robes stuffed with sweets and their faces flushed with exhilaration.

For the two Muggle-borns, Halloween night had been an absolute thrill. First they visited the local record store, where they shared a pair of headphones and listened to some of Rose's favorites (like the Spice Girls), some of Noel's favorites (like Radiohead), and a catchy new song off the Billboard charts about some men in black. When the store closed, the pair then decided to follow a small group of trick-or-treaters they saw migrating into the nearby neighborhoods and beg for sweets along with them. Not all the houses had treats to give out, but the ones that did had delicious gifts, like candied apples and chocolate bars.

Noel held Rose's hand as they darted across the street together, just ahead of a passing car. When they reached the pavement on the other side, they were both breathing heavily and laughing.

"You okay?" asked Noel through their laughter.

Rose struggled to catch her breath. "Hahaha – yeah...yeah, I'm okay!"

With a laugh, Noel led Rose in a more leisurely walk up the pavement. Their joined hands swung back and forth between them like a lackadaisical metronome.

"How late is it, anyway?" asked Rose, glancing up at the dark sky.

"1 or 2 in the morning, I'd guess."

Rose couldn't help but mouth "wow" under her breath. "I had no idea – I never felt the least bit tired!"

"I guess it's like that saying goes, then?" said Noel with a grin. "*'Time flies when you're having fun?'*"

Rose nodded, her smile over-bright. "Yeah!"

Noel considered Rose for a moment, their hazel eyes shining with an oddly soft, thoughtful gleam around their smile. Then they gave Rose's hand a squeeze.

"Rose...I want to thank you, for tonight. I've never had so much fun before."

Rose looked up at Noel, smiling amusedly. "Oh, I didn't do anything! All I did was go to the store with you, and follow along after you when we went trick-or-treating..."

"I know, it doesn't sound like much, when you say it out loud," granted Noel, their eyes drifting up toward the sky thoughtfully. "I guess it might be because...you and I were doing it together... rather than it being just me. I've never really gone out and done stuff with someone else before... not just to have a good time, like this."

Rose frowned in confusion. "You mean you've never gone out with a friend before?"

Noel shrugged, clearly unfazed. "Never had any to go out *with*."

Noticing the look on Rose's face, they offered her a reassuring smile.

"It's okay, you...don't have to feel *sorry* for me or anything. I grew up in three different foster homes, so it was hard for me to lay down roots, or make friends, or any of that. Even if I wanted to, I just...well...*'I certainly have not the talent, which some people possess, of conversing easily with those I have never seen before.'*"

They smiled wryly using this particular phrase – clearly it was a quote from somewhere.

"At least when I got accepted to Hogwarts, my case worker stopped moving me around. She figured it made no sense to assign me to a new family, after that...I mean, their memories would have to be altered, if I was sent back again. And I could stay at school during the winter holidays, so...well, I was out of her hair more often than not. She only had to worry about me and my *issues* for a month or so...then I was someone else's problem, the rest of the year."

Noel's tone was almost shockingly matter-of-fact despite the subject matter. Rose recalled what Cho had said about Noel always being very close-to-the-vest even around their fellow Quidditch

players – was it possible, then, that they’d had to deal with all of this on their own and never talked to anyone about it before? Was she the only one in the whole world that Noel had ever told about this?

Rose glanced down at their joined hands sadly.

“I don’t see how anyone could see you as a *problem*,” she mumbled almost petulantly.

Noel looked at Rose out the corner of their eye. Then they forced a small smile.

“...Well, you’ve always been the sort to make friends easily, I don’t doubt.”

“Not really,” argued Rose, her face scrunching up in faint disapproval. “I grew up with Muggles too, you know. Sometimes I used magic randomly and weirded everybody out. And...well, my class started rumors about my dad after he went to jail and my mum and he split up, and I didn’t hang around those kids because I didn’t want to listen.”

Patrick Zeller’s smiling face rippled through Rose’s memory, leaving her disheartened. She hadn’t seen him ever since she first went into hiding. Because of the War and his lack of knowledge about the Wizarding World, she hadn’t even been able to contact him to tell him she was okay. If she had, then he would’ve wanted to know where she was, why she wasn’t at home, where her mum and George were – and Rose couldn’t give him any of those answers even if she wanted to...

“Even my classmates think I can be kind of weird sometimes,” said Rose with an awkward smile. “I didn’t really start making friends at Hogwarts until Professor Ramsay started the MagicChef contest – then I met Owen and Hannah and Millicent and Kevin and Ron and Bridget and Astoria and Arjuna and Cho and Daphne and Colin...”

The two Muggle-borns came up the steps of Beau’s red-roofed house, and when they reached the landing, Rose looked back up at Noel, her smile spreading a little wider.

“...And then, because I knew Professor Ramsay, I got to meet you too!”

Noel blushed slightly, their eyes rippling with several unreadable emotions. Then their lips spread into a smile as wide as Rose’s.

“...Yeah. You did.”

The pair moved to the door, both thinking of the Secret that protected the house (“*The secret ingredient for a Christmas Beef Wellington is chestnuts*”), before Noel twisted the doorknob and it swung open for them as if it had simply been unlocked. The entrance hall was appropriately dark – Noel held the door open for Rose so she could sneak inside, then closed it behind both of them.

As soon as the door snapped shut, a light abruptly turned on in the adjoining living room. Noel and Rose gave a start, their heads shooting over to the source of the illumination.

Trudy Bonham was sitting on the forest green frieze couch, dressed in a matronly peach-colored dressing gown decorated with flowers and an old-fashioned pair of fuzzy maroon slippers. Her rhinestone-decked lavender reading glasses dangled from a beaded chain around her neck, and in her wrinkled, coffee-colored hands was a cup of steaming hot tea.

Pogo the golden retriever immediately bounded forward, barking excitedly. Leaping up onto Rose so that his paws were resting on both of her shoulders, the dog licked her cheek affectionately, completely unaware of the solemn look on his elderly owner’s face.

“Good evening,” said Trudy, her light tone only slightly masking her displeasure. “Or should I say ‘*good morning*?’”

Her wrinkle-trimmed brown eyes narrowed critically, and Rose couldn’t help but shrink in on herself. Noel, for their part, gave their best attempt at poise.

“We didn’t mean to disturb your sleep,” they said lowly.

Trudy fixed Noel with a sharp look. “Clearly didn’t put much thought into your *actions*, then, did you?”

Somewhere in the next room, along the darkened hallway that led to the kitchen and the office, several off-key, tinkling piano notes echoed through the air. Trudy raised her gaze slightly, shifting her focus to over the teenagers’ heads.

“Lucius, they’re back.”

Noel and Rose flinched in great surprise. Whirling around, they were suddenly faced with Lucius Malfoy coming up the hall, dressed in his black smoking jacket and matching silk pants. He held up his wand and the white *Lumos* charm lighting it created unpleasant shadows on his cold, pale face. He was clearly furious, and unlike Trudy, he didn’t give any attempt at passive-aggressiveness.

“Tell me,” he said quietly, his voice cruel enough to make Rose tremble, “which one of you bantlings came up with this brainless stunt and which one of you encouraged it?”

Noel stepped in front of Rose protectively and stuck their chin out defiantly.

“Sorry, but I don’t see how a *Death Eater* has the moral high ground to – ”

“*Your* idea, then,” Lucius cut them off with a condescending sneer. “I figured as much.”

“Not another word, Noel!” Trudy spoke before Noel could snap back, her tone becoming louder and more reproachful.

She put her cup of tea down on the coffee table, striding over to stand on the other side of Rose and Noel from Lucius. Pogo came up beside Trudy, whining sadly, and she patted the top of his head; then she turned on Noel and Rose, her brown eyes boring into them with steaming, silent anger.

“I frankly don’t know where to start,” the old woman said, her tone staying low and stable despite the fiery fury rippling just under the surface. “Sneaking out of a house magically enchanted to keep you safe – going out alone on one of the *most popular holidays* in the Wizarding World, dressed in magical clothing – not leaving any word behind about where you were going – putting not just yourselves, but Gordon Ramsay, his family, his Helpers, and *everyone else in this house* at risk – what in Merlin’s name were you *thinking*?”

“I’ll tell you what they were thinking,” said Lucius icily, his gray eyes flaring with venom. “*Nothing* – except perhaps placating their adolescent lust for *rebellion*.”

Noel glared at Lucius, but they tried to rein in their temper as they faced Trudy.

“We were being careful. I brought a Decoy Detonator and Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder with us – we would’ve been able to handle it, if something happened – ”

“*Oh?*” said Trudy harshly. “I was unaware that your new-fangled Detonators and Darkness Powder could heal Death’s Head Acid, or counteract Truth Potion, or block an Unforgivable Curse.”

“But none of that happened!” said Noel defensively.

“*Because you were **lucky**, Noel Harwich!*” Trudy snapped. “Do you hear me? You were *lucky*, and no amount of cleverness or planning would have protected you, if you hadn’t had that luck! These people who long for our deaths, both at the Ministry and otherwise, are all *adults*, every last one of them – you are *fourteen years old!*”

“Harry Potter was fourteen when he dueled You-Know-Who,” argued Noel.

“And so was my *grandson* when an Auror shot a *Killing Curse* at him!” Trudy shot back, her strong voice shaking with emotion.

Everyone went abruptly silent. Trudy’s tearful, blazing gaze was fiercer than Rose had ever seen it – even Owen’s eyes, which were the same color and shape as Trudy’s, had never had a flicker of that kind of pain and harshness before.

Noel’s face had gone very white. Their hands clenched into fists at their sides.

“What do you *expect* us to do?” they whispered, clearly trapped between remorse and desperation. “Just...do *nothing*, just *accept* being prisoners? We’ve been trapped in here for *months* now – and we never did anything wrong – we don’t deserve this – ”

Lucius sneered. “Ah yes, you have *so much* in your life to complain about, don’t you, boy? Perhaps you’d like to swap places with one of the Mudbloods out there who *doesn’t* have a place to hide from the Ministry of Magic – ”

“That’s *quite* enough, Lucius,” Trudy cut him off harshly. “Don’t misgender the child just because you’re angry.”

Lucius scoffed. “Hard to *misgender* when the boy can’t decide on one in the first place – ”

Trudy raised her wand threateningly at Lucius, and the ex-Death Eater sourly dropped his argument. Noel’s clenched fists shook as the Ravenclaw struggled to hold in their tears. Rose grabbed hold of their wrist and squeezed it tightly, her gaze drifting to the floor.

“We just wanted to have some fun,” she mumbled sadly. “That’s all.”

Trudy surveyed Rose somberly.

“As much as I agree with your desire to find some joy in all of this despair, Rose,” she said very quietly, “you went about it completely the wrong way. I want you both to go straight to bed and think about what you did. Then I expect you both to give a full apology to Beau later today. Do I make myself clear?”

Rose nodded weakly. She glanced at Noel, and after a moment they caved just enough to incline their head once curtly. Then they rather sharply strode from the room, slipping out of Rose’s grip and avoiding eye contact with anyone.

Rose glanced from Trudy to Lucius, her eyes welling up with tears.

“I’m sorry we made you worry,” she mumbled. “I didn’t think about Owen, or about you all being in any danger – your family too, Mr. Malfoy. If we’d been caught, and they found out about you hiding with us...well, then your family might’ve been hurt too...” She swallowed back a ball of guilt that had formed in her throat. “...I’m really sorry.”

Lucius’s gray eyes narrowed, but he didn’t verbally respond.

‘He won’t forgive me,’ the little Hufflepuff thought gloomily. ‘He already thinks the worst of Noel and me, because of our blood – what we did probably just confirms every awful thing he thinks about Muggle-borns...’

Feeling even worse, she bowed her head and left the room, trudging up the first flight of stairs to the trapdoor that led down to her and Trudy’s bedroom. Once she was inside, Rose immediately

shuffled into bed and huddled in a ball under the covers, trying to hold in her sobs as she forced herself to sleep.

Later that day, around noon, Rose woke up, changed into some fresh clothes, and came down to the kitchen. Trudy was there, fully dressed in a floor-length flower-printed yellow dress and washing dishes, but Noel and Lucius were nowhere to be found. Pogo had been lying down on the floor under the table, but when Rose entered, the dog immediately got up and bustled over to her, his face consumed by an amiable “doggy” smile.

“Hello, Rose,” Trudy greeted her.

The old woman’s smile only accented her visual similarity to Owen all the more. Rose avoided her gaze, feeling ashamed.

Trudy turned off the sink, wiped her hands on the towel hanging off of the fridge’s door handle, and then strode over. Raising both of her skinny, but strong arms, she brought them around the little girl and gave her a hug.

“There now, honey...don’t give me that face,” murmured Trudy gently. “I know I was awful mad at you, and of course you and Noel deserved it...but I know your choice was made out of kindness, not selfishness. And even if it hadn’t been, I’m far too old to hold grudges. As for Lucius...well, he’s still being a right doddypoll about it...but he might come around, if we make it too hard for him to brood.”

Rose cracked a small smile despite herself as Trudy rubbed the top of her back reassuringly.

“Beau will be back for supper,” said Trudy. “He’ll be bringing Gordon and Tana Ramsay with him, so you can speak to them then. For now...why don’t we make you some lunch? What sounds good – bangers and mash? Bubble and squeak cakes?”

Rose considered her answer.

“...Do you know how to make piccalilli?”

Trudy chuckled as she released the little Hufflepuff, patting her head fondly.

“No – but from the sound of it, you’ll be able to show me how.”

And she did. With Trudy’s help, Rose put together a spicy piccalilli relish, while also working on some ham sandwiches. While Rose ate her lunch, Trudy helped jar the leftover piccalilli so they could store it in the fridge for later.

“I can see why you and Owen got along,” said Trudy with a soft, sad smile. “He loved making new things in the kitchen, especially his father’s old recipes. I remember when he made his first loaf of Hawaiian Sweet Bread, he had the proudest look on his face, because it looked and tasted just like how Duane had described it.”

Rose slipped a piece of sandwich to a begging Pogo under the table while Trudy had her back turned.

“Owen showed us how to make that, back before we were a club. Ron thought it’d be cool if we all cooked together, rather than it just being the chefs who were competing – and after that, we just kept meeting up and cooking together, all twelve of us.”

“Oh yes, Owen told me about Ron,” said Trudy thoughtfully. “He’s the youngest Weasley boy, right?”

“Yeah – he’s Keeper on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. His younger sister’s one of their Chasers, too. Ron and Astoria were the two finalists, at the end of the MagicChef contest – dunno which one of them would’ve won in the end, if things hadn’t gone so badly, but Ron’s a really good chef. He’s pretty funny, too.”

Trudy smiled. “Reminds me of Septimus Weasley – I went to school with him, oh a *long* time ago. I suppose he’d be your friend’s grandfather...anyway, he also loved to laugh, though his jokes were...an *acquired* taste. Always said he’d only marry someone who told jokes worse than his – and in the end, he finally found one...in the Black family, no less!”

From the office, Rose suddenly heard the faint plunking of off-pitch piano keys.

“Lucius,” supplied Trudy, upon noticing Rose’s confused expression. “He started messing with the

old piano in the office last night, after we noticed you were gone. I suppose he's trying to tune it."

Rose blinked in surprise. "Mr. Malfoy plays piano?"

"I suppose he'd *have* to," Trudy replied with a bemused shrug. "Can't say *I* know how to tune a piano, or any other instruments...I suppose his father Abraxas might have hired someone to give him lessons."

"Abraxas Malfoy?" asked Rose. "Did you go to school with him, too?"

"Yes – he was a few years younger than me, but I remember him. Resembled Lucius quite a bit, though he was more of a social butterfly. He was very able to play to people, Abraxas. He could be very generous and kind, when he wanted to. That man could make *anyone* like him – at least at first. His reputation was tarnished later on, of course...but there were still quite a few people who didn't want to believe such things of him."

"Because he was nice to them?"

Trudy nodded, giving a low sigh. "I suppose the Malfoy family in general is a perfect example of how appearances can be deceiving..."

Pogo rested his head in Rose's lap, giving another low whine. Slipping him the remainder of her sandwich, Rose picked up her plate and headed to the sink.

"My dad's like that too," she said lightly. "Appearances being deceiving, I mean. People like to judge him because he got arrested once, but he's a really good person."

Trudy gave Rose a small smile. "Perhaps after the War is over, I might get to meet him."

Rose grinned back. "I hope so."

The two women talked off and on for the remainder of the afternoon, swapping stories and

throwing toys for Pogo to chase across the living room. By the time the clock struck five, Rose was feeling much better.

“Beau should be here soon,” said Trudy at last. “I’ll go ahead and get Noel and Lucius...you’d best go wash up – no sense in eating with dog fur caking your hands.”

Rose giggled as she ruffled Pogo’s fur one more time and got to her feet.

“Thanks, Trudy – for everything.”

With a warm smile, Trudy gave her a light push out of the living room. Rose dashed up the first flight of stairs, opened the trapdoor in the landing, and climbed back down into her and Trudy’s room.

Its layout was very similar to Noel and Lucius’s room, being split in half with colorful screens dividing up the space into two postage-stamp-sized sleeping areas and one equally small living space. The major difference was that there was a tiny sink and toilet cramped almost unnaturally into the side of the living space. The plumbing was loud at night, but Beau had it installed by magic as a kindness to Trudy, who often had to make late bathroom runs.

Rose washed her hands and face thoroughly and dried them on the towel hanging off the edge of the sink. She was interrupted, however, by the sound of a pitiful *mew*.

The little Hufflepuff looked up.

“Mr. Whiskers?”

Another fragile meow came from her half of the room. Rose put down the towel, moving over to her bed. She peeked underneath, to find Mr. Whiskers crouched next to her pink Kransimir scrapbook and trembling.

“What is it, Whiskers?”

The small white cat meowed anxiously again. Reaching out, Rose scooped both him and her

scrapbook out from under the bed. As soon as she grabbed hold of the book, though, she realized the pages were wet.

“Huh?”

Putting Mr. Whiskers down on the bed, she turned the scrapbook over to get a better look. There was nothing visible on the outside, so she opened it. As soon as she did, she realized many of the pages were covered in red splotches that hadn’t been there before.

Rose gasped. *‘Blood!?’*

She flipped through the pages, searching for entries. It didn’t take her long to find several pages of them, all of them from earlier that morning.

Guys, I woke up and found my scrapbook covered in these stains – who’s bleeding?! Is everyone all right?! Please respond!

Cho

I’m fine. Everyone, report in, now!

Daphne

I’m all right!

Hannah

I'm okay.

Astoria

Safe.

MB

I'm fine.

Arjuna

I'm here.

Ron

Guys –

The blood is Kevin's. Kevin and his parents were attacked by Guilders last night, and Kevin Disapparated here to Glasgow. He used my pictures and my descriptions to try to imagine himself there – it worked, but he ended up Splinching his hand off. Dennis and I found him in the park and brought him home. Dad wanted to bring Kevin to the hospital, but there'd be no good way to explain his injuries and the Bobbies wouldn't let Kevin stay with us, so we've just had to bandage him up the best we can. He's doing all right, but his memory's all messed up. He doesn't remember his parents at all: he seemed shocked he even had them in the first place! I think it has to be some sort of messed up Confundus or Memory Charm, but I have no idea why the Guilders would've wanted to wipe Kevin's memory or even target him at all! They're been kidnapping Muggles, so why would they attack a magical family, especially if they were in hiding?

I'll update more later – everyone, stay safe!

Colin

Colin, please take care of Kevin as best you can! I'm so, so grateful that he's all right, despite his injuries...if it had been the Death Eaters, we might have lost him...

Love,

Hannah

Colin,

I don't know if you can get essence of dittany where you are, but here are some other things that can help with the bleeding:

1) Make sure Kevin lies down and keep the wounded limb elevated over the rest of his body as much as possible.

2) Keep the wound clean, to prevent infection.

3) Wrap the wound tightly in bandages, applying pressure to the places that are bleeding the most, and change them regularly.

Tell Kevin we're here for him. I'll keep him and you in my thoughts, every moment.

Love from

Astoria

Colin –

I'm going to try to tape some dittany plant into the scrapbook, to see if you can take it out on your side. I brought several bottles with me when I first left home, just in case. If you can take it out,

please refer to the instructions I taped onto the next page about how to brew essence of dittany. I assume you still have your cauldron, but if not, maybe you could use some kitchen supplies, in a pinch?

Please take care of Kevin: he'll need your support, both medically and emotionally.

Love,

Cho

Cho and Astoria –

Thanks for the help. Kevin's resting in my room right now: we'll change his bandages once he wakes up.

Later,

Colin

G uys...

*I've messed up so **bad**.*

*When I saw the blood in the scrapbook, I immediately thought the worst. We've already lost Owen and Bridget, and I thought for sure that we'd lost someone else, and that I'd done **nothing** to stop it. Harry and **Hermione** had been talking about the mission Dumbledore assigned us – they didn't know what I'd found or what I was reading at first, and when they finally stopped long enough to ask my opinion and realized that I wasn't paying attention...*

I blew up at Harry. I said so many horrible, untrue things. I yelled at him about how I thought he knew what he was doing – that we started this mission for Dumbledore, but we've done nothing but hide away in a tent, while innocent people are dying –

*I said he didn't care. I said he didn't care about **Bridget**, or Ginny, or any of you. I said Ramsay was right – that Harry's just like **Dumbledore**, only caring about the cause and not caring about the **casualties** –*

None of it was true...I know none of it was true...I knew it then too, but I kept screaming it anyway...and worst of all, when Harry yelled back and Hermione tried to calm me down, I got so angry that I grabbed my things and left.

I left them. I abandoned the two most important people in my life, and now, thanks to me having Disapparated without knowing the location we were hiding out in that well, I now have no way to find them again. They think that I hate them, they probably hate me, and they're on a mission so dangerous that I originally refused to let them go on it without me. And now...I'll probably never see them again.

I don't know what to do. I don't know anything anymore.

Ron

Tears were streaming down Rose's face by the time she'd finished Ron's tear-stained letter. She read the entries several more times, trying to let it all sink in.

Kevin badly injured, with no memory of his parents – and Ron, all alone and clearly in agony - she wanted to help so badly, but she knew she wouldn't be able to at all. Even if she *did* decide to leave the house again, there was no way she could find them or help them without using magic –

In an instant she'd made up her mind. Grabbing the closest gel pen she could reach (which happened to be purple), she scribbled a response, forcibly trying to keep her shaking hand as steady as she could manage:

Ron, where are you? I'm going to send someone to get you. Colin, help for Kevin is on the way too.

Everything's going to be okay – I promise.

xoxoxo

Rose

Snatching up the scrapbook, Rose climbed the ladder quickly up to the trapdoor, slapping it open

and hoisting herself quickly out of the staircase.

Standing in the entrance hall were Noel, Trudy, and Lucius, and just past them were large-nosed Beau, dark-haired Tana, and square-faced Ramsay, all taking off coats and scarves. The last three must have just entered the house a few moments prior, but when Rose appeared so suddenly out of the landing, everyone immediately tensed up, all sensing the girl's urgency even before she'd opened her mouth.

"Rose," said Ramsay. It was a greeting, but clearly one that said he knew she had something to say.

"Professor," Rose said urgently, "Ron's in trouble. Kevin too."

She opened up her pink scrapbook, flipping it to the right pages. As soon as the blood stains became visible, Trudy, Tana, and Beau gasped, but Rose ignored them, shoving the open book into Ramsay's hands.

"Kevin's hurt bad," she explained quickly. "And Ron – Ron's all alone – he was with Harry and Hermione, but something happened –"

The mention of Harry Potter and his friends made Lucius flinch. Ramsay scanned the entries very quickly, his sharp blue eyes narrowing and widening at several points as he turned the page. Noel glanced from Rose to the scrapbook in Ramsay's hands and back, their face full of concern, as Trudy brought an arm around Rose, gently pulling her to her side. Tana peeked over her husband's shoulder at the bloodstained letters; as she read them, her eyes grew wider and she squeezed Ramsay's arm in both of hers.

"Trying to Disapparate to an unknown location at fifteen, without any training –" she breathed in disbelief and horror, "– Gordon, a wound like that would take weeks to heal – he needs *real* medical help, not an amateur attempt –"

Once he'd finished reading, Ramsay looked at Tana, his eyes flashing with resolve.

"Beau, I'm afraid our dinner plans will have to be rescheduled. Tana will have to take a train to Glasgow tonight."

Ramsay turned to Rose, handing back her scrapbook.

“I’ll stay here until Ron tells us where he is,” he said quietly. “It’ll be best if I pick him up in person.”

Rejected Offers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ron waited tensely at a small outdoor café, not looking anyone in the eye and trying desperately not to look as lost, terrified, and upset as he felt.

He'd been sitting on a cliff overlooking the Bristol Channel when Rose first asked him where he was. Unfortunately there would've been no way anyone could Apparate to his location, given how remote it was, and Ron didn't dare have someone meet him at the Burrow. If something happened, he wanted to be as far away from home as possible – yes, his first instinct had been to run home when he was all juiced up by that stupid locket, but now that the burning sensation the chain had left on his skin had faded, he knew it was the *last* place in the world he wanted to go.

Ron brought a hand up through his hair, which was now an inky black color. On the suggestion of Rose's roommate Trudy, the youngest Weasley boy had used a few charms to change his appearance just enough that he might not be instantly recognizable, changing his hair color and length enough that he could comb his darker bangs into his blue eyes. Noel even lent Rose their compact of powder foundation so she could tape it into the scrapbook and Ron could use it to hide his freckles. Unfortunately there wasn't much he could do about the stubble that had started growing on his face, but Ron figured that it might not be that hurtful to his ruse.

The minutes dragged on painfully as Ron sat at the outdoor table alone, trying and failing to steady his breathing. At one point a pretty blond server tried to take his order, but he waved her off distractedly.

"Just a few more minutes," he mumbled, forcing a weak smile but not really looking her in the face.

As she walked off, Ron's eyes darted up and down the street, studying the people walking past the Leaky Cauldron. The Muggles, of course, walked right by it and barely gave it a second glance, but every-so-often someone – clearly a witch or wizard – would slip inside.

'That's Perkins,' thought Ron, recognizing Mr. Weasley's old partner from the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office. *'Merlin, he looks pale...like a ghost hovering about.'*

Despite the paleness of his face, Perkins was smiling slightly as his eyes scanned the piece of parchment in his hands. Once he reached the entrance to the Leaky Cauldron, however, he shot

covert looks around his surroundings, before stuffing the parchment inside his plaid coat and strolling inside with a much more solemn expression.

'Must be the latest Abraxan pamphlet,' concluded Ron. Despite himself he wished he could read a little of it – it'd been kind of nice to listen to R.J. Moon's words when Lee read some of the pamphlets aloud during his Potterwatch broadcasts.

Once Perkins had disappeared, Ron caught sight of another man walking past the Leaky Cauldron, dressed in a black winter coat, a blue collared shirt, and pants that were so long on him that he'd needed to fold the cuffs twice over. He looked about nineteen and had a rather bulbous nose, but when he caught sight of Ron, his eyes narrowed slightly. Then he strode over with new purpose, offering Ron a smile as he stopped a foot away from him.

"...How were the mint chocolate truffles?" the large-nosed man asked very quietly.

Ron squinted at him in confusion. Then, a few seconds later, his eyes widened.

"...As good as Harry said they were," he murmured back, stunned.

The young man – who Ron realized had to really be Gordon Ramsay, under Polyjuice Potion – relaxed, his face becoming much more serious.

"Come on," whispered Ramsay. "Let's get out of here."

Fighting the miserable lump that had cropped up in the back of his throat, Ron shakily got to his feet and followed after the transformed Ramsay and around the corner away from the Leaky Cauldron and the sleepy café. Once they were out of sight of any bystanders, Ramsay extended his arm, Ron took hold of it, and the two disappeared with a *CRACK*.

Ron and Ramsay reappeared a moment later beside a bridge. Running under the bridge was a small river, whereupon several swans and geese were leisurely swimming.

"Welcome to Stratford-upon-Avon," Ramsay said stridently. "We'll have to walk a short way, but

once we get back to the house, we can talk properly.”

He set off at a brisk walk. Ron had to hitch-step to catch up, but once he did, he could keep Ramsay’s pace very easily thanks to his long legs.

The streets were bustling with activity. Men, women, and children gathered in clumps around the rustic buildings, taking pictures and talking amongst themselves. One or two clusters looked to be tour groups, as those people were gathered around one other impeccably dressed person speaking at the top of their voice to be heard.

Ramsay and Ron strode right through the hustle and bustle to one city square in particular. Set up in the center of the pavement was a decently sized, but narrow castle-like structure made of stone. A clock and tiny windows were inlaid on each of the four sides, turrets lined the top, and it was decorated with stone statuettes of an eagle, a lion, a unicorn, a couple of goblins, and several owls. There was also a small wooden door, which likely was only used by the occasional workman, and words were chiseled into the stone just over it:

*“IN HER DAYS EVERY MAN SHALL EAT IN SAFETY
UNDER HIS OWN VINE WHAT HE PLANTS, AND SING
THE MERRY SONG OF PEACE TO ALL HIS NEIGHBOURS.
GOD SHALL BE TRUELY KNOWN, AND THOSE ABOUT HER
FROM HER SHALL READ THE PERFECT WAYS OF HONOUR
AND BY THOSE CLAIM THEIR GREATNESS NOT BY BLOOD.”*

Ron wasn’t entirely sure what it meant. He wished so much that Hermione had been there – no doubt *she* would’ve understood it.

Ramsay casually leaned an arm against the wood of the tiny door.

“Ron,” he said in a business-like matter, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

Ron blinked. “What?”

Ramsay smiled wryly. The expression looked odd on such a boyish face.

“My father and I took a picture in front of this fountain when I was two, with me sitting on his shoulders. He kept that picture in his wallet for the next thirty years.”

Ron frowned in confusion. Smiling more broadly, Ramsay reached out toward the door again. This time, however, a new gold doorknob had appeared, just above the original, and when Ramsay turned it, the door opened as if it had always been unlocked.

‘This thing,’ Ron realized, his blue eyes widening, *‘it’s a safe house!’*

“Come on in,” said Ramsay amusedly. “The Secret on this place will keep anyone from seeing us, but no sense in dawdling...”

With a nod, Ron walked inside, and Ramsay closed the door behind them.

The safe house was much roomier on the inside than its exterior would suggest. Ron soon found himself in a friendly-looking entrance hall with a cherry coat rack and a forest green floor rug.

Ramsay withdrew a tiny vial from the inside of his coat, uncorked it, and gulped it down. Little by little, as he took off his black coat and hung it up, he started to change back into himself, with his hair lightening, his round jaw becoming more angular, and his legs lengthening. Within seconds, Ramsay was his old self again.

Unfolding the pants he’d had to roll up several times to fit his shorter legs, the once Potions-professor straightened up and strode past Ron down the hall.

“Go ahead and leave your things there.”

Ron glanced at the coat rack reluctantly. After a moment, he plopped his rucksack down on the floor next to the door and slipped his wand out of his right pocket.

“Finite Incantantum,” he mumbled, pointing his wand at his hair. *“Reditus Naturalum.”*

His hair began to recede back to its usual length, the color warming until it was once again bright ginger red. Then Ron hung his worn maroon coat on the rack and followed Ramsay down the hall into the kitchen.

Ramsay had already taken out his wand and had nonverbally summoned silverware from a drawer and two jars from the fridge to land gently on the island in the center of the kitchen.

“I made some cheesecake-in-a-jam-jar yesterday, so we’d have something sweet to eat in a pinch,” he explained with a smile. “It’s Tana’s turn to make our next treat, once these are finished up...”

He plopped himself down on one of the bar stools set up in front of the island, indicating the one next to him. Ron entered the room and slowly lowered himself onto the stool. His eyes darted down to the cheesecake-in-a-jar set in front of him: there were about twelve blueberries on top.

Ramsay picked up his fork and took a bite from his cheesecake-in-a-jar, his sharp-lidded blue eyes running over Ron’s face carefully. After a moment, he spoke again.

“...Rose showed me your letter.”

Ron flinched. His gaze stayed locked on the cheesecake-in-a-jar as he silently picked it up and brought it into his lap.

Ramsay looked down at Ron’s hands and then up at his face again. Then he exhaled quietly through his nose.

“...I’m sorry, Ron. You, Harry, and Hermione should never have had to take on the responsibilities you’ve had to. It wasn’t right that so much was put on your shoulders.”

Ron’s throat clenched, making it impossible for him to answer.

No, it hadn’t been fair. Ron had been convinced that Dumbledore had left them a path to follow – that he, Harry, and Hermione had and knew everything they needed to succeed – that Dumbledore wouldn’t have sent them to do all this, if they didn’t – yet, at every turn, it felt like all they’d ever done was guess, stumble around, and make mistake after mistake.

It wasn't fair – the whole thing hadn't been fair, from the start.

“You worrying about the people you love is not wrong,” Ramsay said very firmly. “You have a lot to lose – more than most. A warm, stable home – five older brothers and a younger sister – two loving parents – many friends, some of whom are in the line of fire...”

Bridget and Kevin's faces flickered through Ron's mind.

“Grief's an invisible weapon,” Ramsay said softly. “It can pierce your lungs at any time, without warning, and the wounds can fester for years. And let me tell you something: *there's nothing wrong with wanting to avoid it. Nothing.* And no matter how ‘important’ this mission Dumbledore gave you is, you shouldn't have felt obligated to do it, at the expense of caring for the ones you love. You were owed that choice.”

Ron's eyes snapped up to Ramsay's face abruptly.

“I *did* have a choice,” he shot back, a little more fiercely than he'd intended. “Harry chose to go. I chose to go with him.”

“And you chose to leave,” Ramsay pointed out.

A wave of nausea ran over Ron's shoulders and down his back. He stared at Ramsay, feeling like he was once again facing Harry in the middle of their argument – watching his wounded, anguished green eyes flood with anger as he tried to obscure how much Ron's words had hurt him –

Ramsay rested a hand on Ron's shoulder in an attempt to comfort him.

“Ron...your feelings are nothing to be ashamed of.”

Ron shot to his feet, putting the jar sharply back down on the island and tearing his shoulder out of Ramsay's reach.

“*Nothing?*” he repeated, his voice strained in its volume and pitch. “*Nothing?* I *abandoned* them – I abandoned Harry and Hermione when they needed me the most! I let myself get all worked up, seeing things that weren’t there and thinking things that made no sense – who *cares* if that damn locket was affecting me, I still did those things! I still thought them! I wasn’t possessed like Ginny was when she opened the Chamber of Secrets – she woke up from each trance as if nothing had happened, forgetting where she was or why she’d done things – I *knew* what I was doing! I *knew* what I was thinking and feeling and I somehow felt *justified* in it! I somehow convinced myself that I was the only one who cared – that Harry was snogging Hermione behind my back, lying to my face – that they might have left Bridget on purpose, decided that she wasn’t important enough to save – ”

Every word was a knife in Ron’s heart. His whole frame started to shake as his eyes filled with angry tears and he clenched his fists in front of him almost in a fighting stance.

“ – I *betrayed* them! Both of them! I betrayed my best friend – I betrayed the – ”

The memory of Hermione’s desperate cries as he stormed out of the tent made Ron choke. The tears that had welled up in his eyes streamed down his cheeks silently as he shut his eyes, turning away from Ramsay and clutching the countertop hard with one hand.

Ramsay looked at the younger man’s back sadly.

“You *were* wrong to have left, Ron. I’m not denying that. You were wrong to have said those things to Harry, too. But the pain you felt, the anger, the fear...however wrong the rationale behind it might have been...was nothing to be ashamed of. In any other time and place, you and Harry would’ve been able to have an argument without these kinds of stakes and make up with the smallest effort. *Everyone* should be allowed to do that. And your feelings were real to you, if nobody else.”

The chef took a steadying breath through his nose as he put down his own jar.

“...Once I knew a man – a Muggle – who had a son who was a wizard. No one else in his family had magic, so when the boy received his Hogwarts letter, it turned the man’s whole world upside down. He had to suddenly lie to everyone he knew – had to send his son to a different school than his other children and give him special treatment just because of his abilities – every year, his son disappeared for months at a time...and every other day, he was reminded that the world his son’s existence had roped him and his family into was growing more and more dangerous. Rather than turning to his wife, or perhaps a Mediwitch...he turned to the bottle.”

Ramsay's voice had suddenly gone much quieter. Ron raised his head just slightly.

"In the beginning, it was just a glass at dinnertime, maybe two, but over time, it became a habit – so much so that after a while, he only needed to drink one glass to become someone else entirely. He was belligerent – selfish – petty, impatient...he sounded like a terrible *child* most of the time. And that was on his best days. On his worst...he could become so cruel that he could kick his sixteen-year-old son out of the house, never to return."

Ron's eyes widened. Very, very slowly he turned around, staring at Ramsay in disbelief.

"...You *forgave* him, for that?" he whispered.

Ramsay leaned forward and rested his arms in his lap as he stared at the floor just past Ron's feet.

"In a sad way, alcohol is a lot like Dark Magic," said Ramsay grimly. "It can destroy countless lives and cause irreparable damage. And often, the worst damage of all happens to the person who falls prey to it. My father cut off all contact with me after what happened, and for years, I'd assumed it was because he resented me. But after a while, I came to understand why he wouldn't reach out again. It wasn't that he couldn't forgive me – he couldn't forgive *himself*, no more than I'd been able to forgive him."

His eyes narrowed upon his hands, which were clenching into fists beside his chest.

"When Dumbledore died...there were a lot of things I'd left unsaid, and because I'd refused to let go of that baggage, the best I could do was say them to a headstone. Just like I had for Dorcas – just like I had for your uncles, Fabian and Gideon – "

Ron gave a start.

" – Just like for James and Lily," Ramsay finished with a sad smile. "And I finally just got to the point that I realized...hating the people who wronged me was hurting me more than it could ever possibly hurt them. That hatred was like a weight on my shoulders – something insanely heavy that I had to carry around with me every day, dragging me down with every step. Dumbledore may have been guilty about how he treated me...but there's no way my anger toward him would've injured him more than it did me...so the bitterness I felt didn't even give me the satisfaction of justice. And even after everything...if I'd had the chance to save Dumbledore that night at the Astronomy Tower...I would've done it."

“So you did it for your father,” said Ron quietly. “Because you still had the chance to forgive him.”

Ramsay nodded, his eyes a little warmer as they returned to Ron’s face.

“Forgiveness is not a passive thing, Ron. I forgave my father for how he’d treated me and offered him assistance in hiding. I never offered him my trust, my love...I didn’t give him anything that I wouldn’t give a complete stranger in his position. But when I gave my father the opportunity to prove himself, he did. He helped me find and acquire the funds for safe houses. He helped renovate some places so that we could outfit them with hidden rooms, like the one your friend Rose is staying in. He even helped escort Muggle-borns out of England, like your friend Colin and his family. And eventually...he even offered to be Tana’s and my Secret Keeper...and I actually accepted. All of that...just from him taking the opportunity to prove himself.”

Ron’s eyes fell to the counter, where the cheesecake-in-the-jar still sat. The blue rippled thoughtfully as they ran over the blueberries, without really seeing them.

Ramsay leaned forward slightly in his chair, his sharp-lidded eyes softening with concern.

“I know it’ll be difficult for us to find Harry...but I know we can do it. Just start from the beginning – what mission did Dumbledore send you on?”

Ron looked up at Ramsay, almost stricken. He stared for a long moment, before his eyes slowly shrank back to their usual size.

“...I’m sorry, Professor,” he said quietly. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Ron, if I’m going to help you find Harry, I need to know where you all were going – what you were looking for,” Ramsay said urgently. “You said something about a locket – I assume it must’ve had some Dark Magic in it – was that what you were doing? Looking for cursed artifacts?”

“I’m sorry,” Ron repeated. “But I’ve already betrayed Harry’s trust once. He trusted me with this mission, which was originally only his, and when he let me in on it, I know he didn’t want anyone else to know.”

Ramsay's eyes narrowed, but not in an angry way – instead it only served to make him look more concerned.

“Ron, I understand wanting to be loyal to Harry, and I admire that wish. But I can't help you unless you *let* me.”

Ron's eyes blazed with a new, quiet kind of resolution. “That's the problem, Professor. You *can't* help me with this. If I'm going to take any opportunity I might get to redeem myself to Harry, I have to do it myself – like your father had to himself.”

Ramsay opened his mouth to say something else, but Ron cut him off.

“I appreciate the offer – *really*,” he said firmly. “You've been a great help, and I'm really grateful. I know I can't forgive myself yet, but you're right, I've got to at least try to earn Harry and Hermione's forgiveness if I can. But...”

He swallowed.

“...This mission is too important, I can't risk it. If Harry fails, then the whole world will be in danger, my family and friends included. That's why I went with him in the first place – because I can't just focus on shielding myself, or the people I love, when the Death Eaters are out there destroying families just like mine. I've got to fight until they're beaten, once and for all.”

Ramsay considered Ron for a very long moment, his gaze very critical. Then, at long last, his expression softened.

“...All right,” he murmured. “If that's what you've decided...then I must respect it.”

Ron could hear the disappointment in his voice, but he was grateful that Ramsay didn't decide to challenge him further. The chef brought a hand up, picked up Ron's cheesecake-in-a-jar, and put it in his hands with both of his.

“Go ahead and eat up now,” he said as he waved his wand at the cupboard, summoning teabags and cups. “I don't doubt you'll want to go out looking for Harry, but you should at least eat something before you leave. And if you don't find him and you need a place to rest your head for the night, make your way back here, all right?”

Once he'd dipped two teabags into the teapot, he filled it with a silent "*Aquamenti*" charm and held it over a Coldfire Enchantment from his wand to heat up the brewing tea. Ron's face spread into a wide, soft smile.

"...Thanks, Professor."

November 2, 1997

Guys,

Professor Ramsay's wife Tana arrived at our house early this morning. Thank you so much for sending her, Rose – she really is a Godsend!

Anyway, Tana's been tending to Kevin for the last few hours. She says it might take a day or two for his injuries to heal and she wants him to stay in bed until then, so Dennis and I have been cooking him meals and such. Kevin's smiling as usual, but I don't think he's doing so well. He hasn't been talking much and as soon as he thinks we're not looking, his smile disappears and his eyes go all lost and gloomy – like he's staring down demons nobody else can see...

Later,

Colin

I made it to the Fountain House (Ramsay's safehouse) last night too. I'll be heading out to go look for Harry and Hermione pretty soon, but on Ramsay's offer, I might pop back if I can't find them in a few days. Wish me luck!

Hang in there, everyone.

Ron

Ron and Colin,

I'm so glad to hear everything's all right with both of you. Colin, please keep us updated on Kevin's condition, and please keep him company. The best way to heal emotional scars is just being there when the person needs you – to listen, to care, or just to physically be there.

I wish that things were better here at school. In our Defense Against the Dark Arts class yesterday, Amycus demonstrated the seven ways one could use the Draught of Despair, including torture through ingestion, "rehabilitation" (which is actually brainwashing) through injection, and even execution by submerging someone into a pool of it! He also chose my classmate from Gryffindor, Romilda Vane, at random and forced her to take a small dose of the Draught, so as to demonstrate for the rest of us the potion's effects...I've never seen someone in more pain in my life – I must wonder what the Cruciatus Curse could possibly look like, if this is only the effect of a potion! Romilda was crying in agony, tears streaming down her face and shouting something about her mother – I think the potion must have made her relive all of her worst memories at once, almost like a dementor might, except this was so much more painful...

Amycus and Alecko have also been cracking down on students who try to teach spells and potions that "aren't on their lesson plans." Apparently they think that the stuff we learned in our past Defense Against the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies classes is all rubbish, so they don't want older students to "mislead" the newer ones with contradictory information. I even heard that Morag MacDougal was given detention for trying to teach some third years how to cast a proper Disarming Spell.

At least the library is still peaceful. It's been nice to just hide away inside when the days get long. Even though everything is so quiet, there are always a lot of students gathering around to study and do their homework, so it almost feels like how the Ravenclaw commonroom used to.

Please stay safe, everyone. I miss you all terribly.

Astoria

"Ugh – I just can't get it!"

Astoria looked up, startled.

A trio of first year Ravenclaws were clumped together at the table to the left of her, boring over a couple of books they'd taken off of the neighboring shelves. The tallest of them, a coffee-skinned boy with freckles, was waving his wand aggressively up and down.

“Well, I don’t think you’re supposed to wave it like *that*,” said a girl with blond pigtails.

“Honestly, Gamp, you’d think someone whose father’s a former Dueling Champion would be able to handle a simple Wand-Lighting Charm,” sniggered a boy with hair as blond as the girl’s and an overbite.

“Let’s see *you* do it, then!” snapped Gamp, pointing his wand right in the other boy’s face.

Madame Pince’s cross face suddenly whipped out from behind the shelf.

“*SHHHHHH!*”

The trio winced, immediately going silent and looking glumly down at their books.

Feeling pity for the three underclassmen, Astoria closed her gray scrapbook and tucked it under her arm, before she pushed her chair back and walked over to them.

“Would you like me to show you?”

The three all looked up, startled.

“Huh?” said the boy called Gamp.

“Would you like me to show you how to cast *Lumos*?” Astoria repeated a little more straightforwardly.

“Uh – yeah!” said Gamp, looking thrilled. Then, just as abruptly, his expression tensed and his voice lowered to an anxious whisper, “Wait – won’t you get in trouble? I mean – it’s not on Amycus’s lesson plan – ”

Astoria’s eyes narrowed.

That was true – the Carrows likely wouldn't be pleased, if they saw them. And she'd promised her father that she would be careful...

'But these kids should learn something useful, in their first year,' thought Astoria sourly. 'They're sure not going to learn anything listening to Alecto and Amycus – and really, getting a detention or two isn't that bad, in the scheme of things...'

Looking over the underclassmen's worried faces, she put on the bravest smile she could and rested a hand down on their table.

"Don't worry about me," she reassured them. "I can handle it. Now here – "

She took out her wand, slowly demonstrating the wrist movement several times so the three could follow along.

"The wrist movement itself is pretty simple – it's just sort of a 'L' shape, see?" she murmured. "The big thing is that you're not *creating* light. Charms affect what an object *does*, not what it is; in this case, you're making your wand light up, when it wasn't lit up before – "

Someone abruptly cleared their throat, making all four students jump.

Astoria's head shot up, and she was suddenly face-to-face with Draco Malfoy. His gray eyes trailed over Astoria's face and then down to the open book she'd laid her hand next to on the table.

"Excuse me for interrupting," he said, his voice rather low and sardonic in his throat as his gaze flickered back up to clash with Astoria's, "but you've been requested in Professor Carrow's office immediately."

Astoria's face blanched as she glared back at Draco. She may have been surprised when she found out that he and his family had gone to Ramsay for help, but that didn't change the fact that Draco betrayed Hogwarts to the Death Eaters. The thought of her ever feeling the least bit sorry for him, when he went and did something like that, made Astoria feel nauseous.

"Thanks for letting me know," Astoria replied coldly, her light blue eyes boring into Draco's stony

gray like daggers.

She moved to go, but Draco seized hold of her arm.

“I was told to *escort* you,” he shot back sharply.

Astoria’s eyes flashed in disgust and fury.

“Let *go* of me.”

She tried to yank out of his grip, but he held on stubbornly.

“You’re coming with me, *now*.”

“I said *let go*!”

Tightening his grip on her arm even as she fought harder, Draco used his hold to roughly escort Astoria past the rows of books and out of the library.

By the time they reached the empty hallway, the young Ravenclaw looked split between anger and intense nausea, and she raised her wand and pointed it right in Draco’s face.

“Let go of me *right now*, or I swear I’ll – ”

Draco whirled on her, his expression suddenly just as irritated as hers. “Salazar’s Line, is this the *gratitude* I get for – ?”

“*Incendio*!”

In an instant, fiery coals began to erupt out of her wand, landing on Draco’s hand.

“OWWWW!”

With a yelp, he recoiled, releasing Astoria at last.

“*Gratitude?*” she repeated furiously. “Gratitude for *what*, invading my personal space without my permission – yanking me around against my will – forcing me to confront Amycus Carrow on *your* schedule? You have some nerve – ”

“Oh, for Merlin’s – it was a *LIE!*” Draco said irritably, nursing his wounded hand. “I lied that Carrow had sent for you to get you out of that mess, you dim bulb!”

“And what ‘*mess*’ was that?” demanded Astoria.

Draco’s gray eyes hardened. “Don’t play dumb – I know those first years were studying a Charm they weren’t supposed to. We learned *Lumos* from Quirrel – I don’t doubt you learned it from Lupin – but I’m damn sure that *Carrow* never assigned it. He’s too focused on teaching them about what the Cruciatus Curse feels like – ”

“And he’s had a lot of help from you there, hasn’t he?” challenged Astoria. “I’ve heard you’re the only person who’s been able to cast that Curse – I daresay Amycus has taken *quite* a shine to you.”

There was something of a flinch in the back of Draco’s eyes, but it disappeared so quickly Astoria wondered if she might have imagined it. The Slytherin prefect stepped forward, bearing down on her; Astoria involuntarily took a step back, trying to maintain the distance between them.

“You should consider yourself lucky that *I* found you, and not him,” Draco whispered. “You know *he* would’ve actually punished you.”

Astoria’s eyes narrowed. “I never asked for your help.”

“Your sister’s put a lot on the line to stand by you,” said Draco, his voice softening so much it almost felt like a silent, deadly poison trickling into Astoria’s ear. “Your recklessness doesn’t just endanger you – it endangers her as well – ”

SLAP.

Draco stumbled back, trying to steady himself on his feet. When he looked up, Astoria's face was pallid white and her eyes were very wide.

"Don't you *dare* talk about my sister," she hissed, her voice shaking with terror despite the anger she tried to convey.

She turned and strode away up the hall. To her aggravation, Draco pursued her. Thanks to his long legs, he was able to catch up and match her pace, walking quickly alongside her.

"Greengrass, stop and *listen* to me, will you?! I'm trying to *help* you – you don't think the Carrows wouldn't be angry about me sticking my neck out to – ?"

"To stop me from teaching some first years how to light up their wands?" spat Astoria. "Oh yes, that's *so* noble of you – "

"To step in before you got caught!" Draco shot back. His voice was inching back and descending lower into his throat, making it more growl-like by the minute.

"How generous! I suppose when you catch me trying to teach a first year how to tune a Muggle radio, you'll swoop in and slay the thing before it bites our heads off – "

"Greengrass, you will *NOT* pull a stunt like that again!"

"What makes you think I'd take orders from you?"

"You...*brain-dead tart!* The Carrows will make an *example* of you, don't you get it?! People already see you as a Muggle sympathizer - if they get the idea you won't stay in line, they'll tear you apart like you're some toy, and they'll make the entire bloody school watch! They're not schoolyard bullies or eccentric Ministry witches – they're *Death Eaters* – I know what they're like – they're *sadists* – "

“Your argument is pretty convincing, for moral-less rats like you.”

Draco’s teeth gnashed together furiously. “*Greengrass*, I swear to Merlin – if you even *try* to do that again, I’ll – ”

Astoria stopped mid-step and whirled on him. Draco tensed up, his pointed chin rising slightly as he glared down at her, matching her fierce gaze.

“I’m no coward like you, Malfoy,” she said very softly. “I’m not afraid to stand up for people who need help...and I’m not afraid of *you*, either.”

The bell rang, and suddenly the hallway around them, which had been completely empty before, filled up with students. Draco and Astoria glared at each other, not realizing the abundance of new company for several moments. Then, finally, Astoria turned on her heel and disappeared into the crowd.

Draco stood stock still as he watched her leave, filled to the brim with the kind of frustration that made him want to throw rocks through a couple dozen windows.

He wasn’t sure what made his body temperature spike more: the fact that he’d failed utterly to do something nice for Daphne’s sister, to keep her out of trouble...or the fact that she was infinitely stronger than him without even trying at all.

Chapter End Notes

The fountain that Ramsay turned into a safehouse is best known as [the American Fountain](#), which is a real structure that really lives in the heart of Stratford-Upon-Avon.

The character of Gordon Ramsay, Sr. and his relationship with his son is highly fictionalized, more based on experiences in my own life than the real Gordon Ramsay's, as the real Ramsay has understandably kept his early family life, including his relationship with his father, quite private.

Bulstrode, Greengrass, and Malfoy

November 3, 1997

Hi, guys,

Kevin's doing much better today. Tana was able to seal up his wounds, though of course his right hand's still missing. She says she'll try to get him an artificial one; it might not be the best quality, but at least he'll be able to walk around in public without getting stared at.

Kevin, I noticed you were flipping through your scrapbook earlier, so I figured I'd paste in the pictures from Dennis's Halloween party. I know you say you're fine, but...well, I don't believe you. But if you don't want to talk about it, I hope this helps, at least.

Later,

Colin

Here are the pictures from the Halloween party I went to too, Kevin! Lalo really liked my Carmen Sandiego costume – he was dressed as a character called Aladdin, who's from this movie made with "animation," or moving drawings. He insisted that I come over to his place and watch it with him sometime, as he said it's one of his favorites.

Get well soon, Kevin. We're all here for you, whenever you need us.

Love,

Cho

Dear Kevin,

Here are some of the pictures I got to take over here too! Hagrid's pumpkins really were wonderful – I think he was trying hard to raise our spirits, given the circumstances. The Carrows have been browbeating him terribly, treating him like a servant rather than a gamekeeper and professor, but bless him, Hagrid has somehow been able to keep his temper. I think Professor McGonagall has been a real help, as she often makes it a point to step between him and the Carrows whenever she can.

Please remember, Kevin, we love you, and get well soon!

Love,

Hannah

No pictures from me, unfortunately, given that I don't have a camera in my rucksack, but I just wanted to tell you to hang in there, Kevin. I've gotta admit, what you've gone through is too terrible for me to understand, and I don't know what you might need to hear right now, but even if I don't, I hope you know that I'm right behind you. I'm sure Ramsay and Tana will be able to find out what happened to your parents, and once we know who hurt you, I promise I'll make sure they get what's coming to them. Until then, just know we're here for you, whenever you need us.

Don't let the world get you down!

Ron

Dear Kevin,

Astoria and I thought you might enjoy seeing some old pictures from when we were little. Uncle Hyperion told us all about the history of Halloween, both for wizards and Muggles, and the Halloween just before I went to Hogwarts, we dressed to the nines and made our own homemade jack-o-lanterns out of different sorts of vegetables like turnips and pumpkins. We then put the lanterns out around our favorite willow tree and sat under the branches as Uncle Hyperion recited the tales of Jack O'Lantern, the Wailing Widow, and the Bloody Baron. When I met the Baron the following year, I passed along Uncle Hyperion's best wishes, and he actually bowed to me!

Kevin, you are an amazingly strong person, and I know you'll be all right, but just know that you needn't walk this path alone. We're here to be your shoulders to lean on, should you ever need it.

Love from

Daphne

Kevin, you're not just a strong person: you are one of the strongest people I know. Even when

you're sad, you put on your best smile and face it. You always want everyone to be happy, even if you can't be yourself. You take every bit of pain onto your shoulders, whether it's yours or someone else's, and still somehow smile anyway. As much as I understand not wanting to burden anyone, I hope you know that you'll never be a burden to us. We'll listen, and we'll offer you as many sherbet lemons as you might need.

I remember you said once that you're never truly alone as long as there are people out there who love you. I believe you were right...so I know you'll never be alone.

Love from

Astoria

November 4, 1997

T haNk yoU, everyone, for the piCtures and letters. TheY really brought a smile to my face.

I love yOu all so mUch tOo.

kevin

November 6, 1997

Kevin received his new hand from Tana yesterday. It's made of cherry wood, and she added a few charms to make it a little more flexible. It doesn't look very comfortable, but Kevin says he'll get used to it. Dad will be dropping Tana off at the train station in Glasgow later this morning, after I go to work.

Hope you all are well!

Cheers!

Colin

November 10, 1997

Did everyone hear Kingsley – I mean, “Royal” – on Potterwatch last night? Man, was his segment good: his words about finding strength from our struggles and seeing hope in how we endure them...I reckon R.J. Moon themselves probably loved it. For those of you who couldn't tune in, the next Potterwatch broadcast will be on December 24, Christmas Eve, and the password is “Clearwater.”

I stopped by the Fountain House again for a night – Ramsay was out checking up on his safe houses, but I finally got to meet Tana, and she's pretty nice. While I was there, we baked some mint chocolate muffins as a surprise for Ramsay when he gets home. I probably won't be there by then, but I figured it'd be a nice way to thank him.

I'll write more soon,

Ron

Noel and I did some baking today too! Noel had been feeling down in the dumps (they'd noticed some whiskers growing on their upper lip this morning and had cut themselves trying to shave them off), so I roped them into baking some coconut cupcakes with me. Here are the pictures we took. I'm really proud of how our sugar paw print decorations turned out; Darcy had jumped up to see what we were doing and ended up tracking flour across the countertop, so we used his prints in the flour as reference!

Beau's started putting on Christmas music in the evenings at dinnertime, including some CDs (which are sort of like tiny Muggle records) of when he was part of the King's College Choir in Cambridge. It was quite pretty – I didn't know Beau could sing so well! Beau told us about each of the soloists as they cropped up and it was so interesting – to Trudy, Noel, and me, at least. Mr. Malfoy looked rather grumpy throughout most of Beau's stories and kept trying to turn the dial on the CD player to make the music louder, as if he wanted to drown us out. Trudy reckons he's just in one of his moods, given that the Christmas season is usually a time for families and he's forced to be without his this year.

Thinking of you all! Write back soon!

xoxoxo

Rose

November 11, 1997

The D.A. stole the Headmaster's chair out of the Great Hall sometime before dinner. Snape made due with one of the usual chairs, but looked quite irritated about it. Later on the chair was found in Professor McGonagall's office with a note that said, "To the Headmistress of Hogwarts, with love, Dumbledore's Army." Of course Professor McGonagall couldn't be assigned any blame since she was teaching classes that entire day, but she still looked like she was having some trouble keeping the smile off her face. I am too – I couldn't be happier to see her get some of the appreciation she deserves!

Love,

Hannah

November 13, 1997

Happy 16th birthday, Bridget. Wherever you are, please know that you're in our hearts and minds always and that we love you so much.

Love from

Daphne

Happy birthday, Bridget! We miss you so much, and please stay strong.

Love,

Hannah

Happy birthday, Bridget. I wish so much that we could be celebrating it together.

Miss you,

Ron

November 14, 1997

I sketched Bridget yesterday in my sketchbook and thought I'd share it with you all, rather than just keep it to myself. Her smile has always been so beautiful – I knew no drawing of her would be complete without it.

We miss you so much, Bridget...

Love,

Cho

November 19, 1997

Kevin's feeling better today, so I took him to go see the shopping center where I work, so I could introduce him to my coworkers. We've been passing him off as our cousin so as not to raise suspicion, though Kevin says he's still getting used to calling me "Harry" in front of everybody. Here's a picture we took to show you! Kevin's had to wear gloves so as to hide his new hand, but fortunately it's cold enough that no one would look twice.

Cheers!

Colin

MY new hand's kiNd of coOl, actUally. I Can pick things up, buT it's still tricky to Write with. I'm wriTing with my leFt hand right now, eVen if it's kind of hard.

MiSs yoU all so muCh!

Kevin

November 24, 1997

The D.A. smuggled in the newest pamphlet by the Abraxans. No update about Bridget, but I figured you all would want to read it all the same.

MB

You beat me to it, Millicent, haha! Dad was able to get the flier to me by smuggling it through Hogsmeade, and then Ernie helped me make copies and leave them around the school. The Carrows unfortunately have already gotten their hands on one and they're naturally furious, but I don't care: I get so much comfort reading or hearing R.J. Moon's words, and there's no way I'm keeping that to myself! You should've seen how Neville's face lit up while he was reading it – I haven't seen him smile like that in a while.

Love,

Hannah

November 28, 1997

Trudy's been very quiet today, and it took us a while to figure out why. Today would've been Owen's fifteenth birthday, if he were still here.

Colin, do you have any pictures of Owen you could tape in today? I hoped I could show Trudy the ones Daphne put in and any you might have, to help her feel better...

Love you all!

xoxoxo

Rose

Rose,

Here are all the pictures I could find – hope they help!

Cheers!

Colin

Dear Rose,

We went ahead and baked a cake in Owen's honor today. Here's the picture we took: we decided on a lemon pound cake and decorated it with sugar feathers, as Hannah remembered him saying he was a Hippogriff scout.

Send our regards along to Owen's grandmother - we all miss him dearly as well.

Love from

Daphne

Thank you, Colin and Daphne! Trudy cried looking over your entries, but she says she loves the pictures very much and is grateful you took the time to put them in for her. I think she feels better now, remembering how many other people loved Owen and miss him too.

Love you lots!

xoxoxo

Rose

December 1, 1997

Happy 16th birthday, R.J.! I'm afraid your birthday present will have to be a little late this year, as Hogsmeade trips are still banned and I won't be able to go shopping until winter break, but I hope to be able to tape it in before Christmas. Even so, at least I'll be able to bake a nice birthday cake in your honor: would a rum and spice cake be all right by you?

As ever, I miss you so much!

Love from

Astoria

Astoria,

We'll meet you in the kitchens at 4:30 to help with Arjuna's cake.

MB

Once Millicent had finished scrawling the quick note into her scrapbook, she quickly tucked it into her black schoolbag and headed upstairs for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Millicent knew she couldn't afford to be late – Amycus had said he planned to test them on the Cruciatus Curse that day, and she had a sneaking suspicion that anyone who failed would have to worry about more than just a bad grade.

Just as Millicent arrived and took her seat just behind Daphne, the door to the teacher's office opened and Amycus entered the classroom, his lips curled up in a sickening smirk.

"Morning, class," he sneered. "Time fer our little *test*."

He turned to the open office door, his expression turning much nastier.

"File in!"

A line of trembling first years came into the room and stood up against the far wall. Millicent noticed how pale her classmates had gotten: not just the usual suspects like Neville and Hannah, but also her fellow Slytherins like Pansy and Tracey.

“Line up!” snapped Amycus.

The seventh years all hurried to their feet and created a line about three feet away from the younger students. Just like before, they lined up so that each seventh year stood in front of one of the first years.

“Now then,” said Amycus briskly, as he walked behind the line of seventh years so closely that he was often breathing right into their ears, “I’m willing to be lenient, in my grading...after all, this magic’s pretty advanced. But then again, all you need to do this spell is to *mean* it...so s’long as you mean it you’ll get the proper results. And if I sense that you’re not putting in enough effort...well...there’ll just have to be *consequences*.”

He locked eyes with Neville and the two stared each other down for a long moment, both sets of eyes equally cold. Then Amycus strolled up to the front of the class, stopping between the two lines of students.

“Begin!”

The room was soon filled with incantations of “*Crucio*,” but few brought out the results Amycus wanted. Crabbe was trying harder than anyone, his beady eyes filling up with hatred and frustration as he kept yelling the curse louder and louder. Hannah kept aiming her wand over her first year’s head, even though Amycus roughly seized her wrist and yanked it down into place several times. Neville never even raised his wand, instead choosing to stand perfectly still and not say a word, and Amycus quickly made an example out of him by pulling him to the side and using the Curse on him instead.

“Amycus can’t *possibly* think he’d really get Longbottom to cast that Curse,” Daphne murmured. “Not when his parents...”

Millicent shook her head grimly. “Nobody with common sense would even try.”

“And Amycus doesn’t have that,” finished Daphne coldly, her dark eyes narrowing.

Not knowing how to respond, Millicent looked around the room, taking in her surroundings fully. In the corner of the room, Amycus violently cursed Neville, making him clench his teeth and shudder in pain. Millicent glanced down at her wand, up at the blond first year girl trembling in

front of her, and then around at her classmates.

Draco, who was on her right, was watching Pansy, Tracey, and Blaise on his other side. All three were casting Curses on the underclassmen in front of them, but none got the response they wanted. The most Blaise achieved was knocking his first year to the ground.

“*Crucio! Crucio!*” cried Blaise, but his tone dripped with more exhaustion with every try.

Pansy’s wand hand was shaking as she glared daggers into the boy in front of her. Tracey’s eyes were filling up with tears.

“Ugh, why isn’t it *working!*?” she groaned, stuck between fury and despair.

“Your emotions are getting in the way.”

The Slytherins all looked up at Draco, startled. His gaze was cold as stone as it drifted from Tracey and Pansy, to Millicent and Daphne on his other side.

“Meaning an Unforgivable Curse doesn’t just mean wanting to hurt someone, or control someone, or kill someone,” he said very softly. “You have to mean the meaning *behind* each curse, so much so that nothing else in the world exists or matters – not your fear, not the people around you...not even you. There’s nothing left but that person and that meaning. When you shout ‘*Imperio*,’ you have to mean that that person’s free will – their mind, their opinion, their feelings – doesn’t matter. When you shout ‘*Crucio*,’ you have to mean that that person’s pain doesn’t matter. When you shout ‘*Avada Kedavra*’...”

Draco trailed off as he turned to the dark-skinned, freckled first year in front of him. The boy trembled seeing the stormy gray fire flaring in the young Death Eater’s eyes.

“*Crucio.*”

Draco’s curse was cast quietly and coldly, but in an instant the freckled underclassman had fallen to the floor, screaming and crying.

Crabbe watched in fascination, but the other Slytherins were not as impressed. Daphne closed her eyes and turned away. Goyle watched with a mixture of awe and uncertainty. Tracey's shoulders were shaking. Blaise's eyes had gone very wide and hollow and he took a visible step back. Pansy stared at Draco, her face full of concern.

Finally Draco lowered his wand and the boy slouched over, crying and shaking as the curse's effects ended. Millicent stared down at him, trying to keep the horror from her face.

'So...' she thought slowly, '...to cast an Unforgivable Curse, you have to be so full of rage...that nothing else exists. No morality, no consequences, no regrets...only hatred. A hatred so powerful...that you become a slave to it.'

Then a thought crossed her mind: a horrible thought.

'But...once you feel that kind of hate...once you believe that no one's life matters, including the person you're hurting...then wouldn't that mean that your life has no value, either? But instead of hurting yourself...you project those emotions onto someone else...is that why they're "Unforgivable?"'

Millicent felt a lump forming in her throat as Amycus strode across the room, clapping Draco on the back.

"Well done, Draco!" he said smugly. "Way to show your classmates how it's done!"

Draco didn't answer and instead merely bowed his head as Amycus walked back down the line toward Lavender and the Hufflepuffs. Once he was gone, Draco raised his wand. The freckled first-year boy was levitated off the floor, and Draco seized his collar, yanking him forward and hissing something menacing at him under his breath. Or at least it *sounded* menacing – Millicent, as she was standing so close to him, could just barely make out what he was saying.

"Tell your buddies to scream," hissed the seventh year Prefect. "I don't care if they're in pain or not – tell them to scream, or I'll give all of you a *reason* to."

He then tossed the first-year boy unceremoniously back down to the floor, his gray eyes putting off a distant, careless air as he turned to Pansy.

"I'm fine," he said before she could open her mouth to say anything. He gave a halfhearted pat to her shoulder and then turned to Tracey. "You got that?"

Tracey was still shaking visibly. "...Y-Yes."

"Good."

Millicent's brown eyes narrowed upon Draco. Clearly having sensed her gaze, he glanced over at her, almost daring her to say something. Instead Millicent inclined her head slightly and turned to Daphne, who still looked unable to face the line of first years.

"Daphne," whispered Millicent, "We should get back to work."

Daphne looked aghast, but Millicent gave her a reassuring look. Raising her wand, the heavysset Slytherin pointed it at the blond first-year in front of her. The little girl glanced anxiously at the freckled boy in front of Draco out the corner of her eye.

"*Crucio*," said Millicent.

The girl gave an over-the-top scream and fell to the ground, huddling in on herself.

"Please stop!" she cried. "Please!"

Millicent lowered her wand, and the girl immediately quieted. Amycus turned to Millicent with a kind of vicious delight.

"*Lovely* work, Millicent! See, Longbottom? *That's* how you do a proper Cruciatus Curse!"

Daphne's dark eyes narrowed with confusion. Millicent smirked slightly and, once Amycus had stepped away, she gave the blond first year a nod. The girl smiled weakly in return, looking thoroughly relieved.

That night, far away from Hogwarts, another woman with the name Bulstrode appeared out of thin air just outside a wrought iron gate surrounding the elegant estate of Malfoy Manor.

Europa Bulstrode waited five seconds for her husband and business partner, Cadoc Bulstrode, to Apparate beside her with a *CRACK*, before the two took off at a brisk walk together toward the gate. Europa's long, dyed blond hair and scarlet cashmere robes and Cadoc's thin, pale face and high-collared violet robes stood out sharply in the dark.

As they approached, Europa whipped out her wand, waving it at the gate and making it spring open for them.

"There seems to be far less of the usual Christmas cheer," Cadoc said idly. His thin eyes and voice were full of the kind of pleasantries that told Europa that he was being sarcastic.

"I doubt the Dark Lord is the sort to host Christmas parties," said Europa sardonically.

"Really?" asked Cadoc dryly. His brown eyes did not widen at all as his eyebrows rose. "Are there not plenty who would *kill* to be invited to one of his gatherings?"

"Only because they'd kill for just about any reason at all."

"Perhaps – but there are plenty of those such people."

"Point conceded."

Despite the plumpness of Europa's face and the weedy length of Cadoc's, their smirks were as identical as if they were twins.

Even after all this time, their interactions had stayed the same as when they were children, snarking behind their teachers' backs and mocking their classmates' new hairstyles. Since Europa's mother had died when she was very young and her father had abandoned the family line to marry a Muggle, Europa had largely grown up at her best friend Cadoc's house, to the point that the two of them had grown closer than most siblings. It seemed almost appropriate to Cadoc's parents that the two marry when the time came, though the arrangement had seemed almost *incestuous* to anyone

who knew Europa and Cadoc well.

Still, the Bulstrodes had made the arrangement work. Cadoc and Europa's marriage allowed them to chase their shared ambition, which was to open their own legal practice, and their new office gained some esteem and favorable press by being a family venture. Even Millicent's birth had given Cadoc and Europa some added credibility, as it humanized them both to their clients and to their associates in the Wizengamot. It even gave Europa the idea she'd needed to defend Lucius Malfoy from conviction when he'd first been brought to trial after the First War. By keeping his wife and infant son in the front row of the courtroom the entire time and letting Lucius interact frequently with them, Europa subconsciously influenced the Wizengamot, making its members see themselves in Lucius's shoes and therefore making it impossible for them to also imagine themselves committing the horrible acts Lucius was accused of. And so in the end, Lucius was acquitted because no one in the Wizengamot could imagine a man both loving his family unconditionally and hating perfect strangers enough to kill.

With a swish of her wand, Europa opened the front door, strolling into the entrance hall with Cadoc at her side. They walked under the large chandelier overhead – one of the three forest green candles on top and four of the white candles along the edge were lit, casting long shadows across the floor and walls and making the hair gel in Cadoc's slicked-back brown hair sheen.

"Seems we're not alone," Europa said quietly, her green eyes studying the candles.

At that moment the double doors to the dining hall opened and Narcissa Malfoy appeared. She was dressed in dark blue dress robes with large shoulders, long sleeves, and intricate black embroidery that gave off the illusion of flowing water.

"Europa..."

Europa opened her arms wide, and Narcissa stepped into them, accepting the embrace her old friend offered.

"It's been a while," said Europa with a small smile. "Missed your party last year, even though I know the circumstances had not permitted it..."

Once Narcissa removed herself from Europa's hold, she and Cadoc exchanged chaste French-style kisses of greeting on each cheek.

“Looking lovely as ever, Narcissa,” said Cadoc, his tone refined and pleasant.

“Thank you for coming,” said Narcissa somberly.

Europa chuckled. “Narcissa, I came when you called me to save your husband from *Azkaban* – you think I wouldn’t come now?”

Narcissa smiled wryly. “Well, this is quite a bit different from that. Come...Antony and Theia are waiting for us at the table.”

She turned and walked back into the dining hall. Europa and Cadoc glanced at each other curiously, their eyebrows raised; then they followed.

The dining hall had always been grand when it was outfitted with all of the proper cutlery, dressings, and food that the Malfoys had arranged for their annual Christmas functions. Without all those things, however, it looked quite a bit emptier and sadder – a shadow of its former self. The candlelight was restrained to the tiny chandelier in the center of the ceiling, a perfect replica of the one in the entrance hall. The portrait of Lucius and Narcissa hanging in the back of the hall was not trimmed with the usual holly or silvery tinsel. There were no dinner plates or silverware set up, though five goblets full of red wine had been set at the head of the table and the two spots on either side of it. And sure enough, the Greengrasses were already seated at the two spots on the right side of the table.

Antony Greengrass sat at the place beside the head of the table, dressed in elegant forest green dress robes with a white collar and black ascot and his dark hair and beard impeccably trimmed. Just beside him was his wife Theia, who was resting one of her hands on the inside of his arm. Her dark brown hair was put up in a beautiful chignon with delicate strands deliberately portioned out to frame her light blue eyes, and she was dressed in high-necked dress robes made of black and white lace.

“Please, sit down,” said Narcissa as she approached the head of the table.

Europa strode forward, taking the seat across from Antony. Cadoc followed along behind, settling down casually to her left. Once everyone was seated, Narcissa waved her wand at the double doors, closing them with a *snap*, and then eased herself into her chair.

“I received the list of Ministry match-ups this morning,” said Narcissa curtly, “and I can only

presume, given how little esteem my family holds with the Ministry at this point, that I'm not the first to know."

She glanced at Europa and Antony. The Greengrasses suddenly both looked very pale, with Antony clenching his jaw furiously.

"We...did receive a copy, yes," Theia murmured, trying desperately to keep her voice steady but clearly having trouble fighting back her disgust and anger.

Europa and Cadoc exchanged cynical glances out the corner of their eyes.

"...We received one as well," Cadoc said after a moment. He watched Narcissa carefully; Europa presumed that since he didn't understand why they were talking about this yet, he wanted to wait and see what Narcissa said next before divulging anything else.

Narcissa placed her hands down on the dining table, interlacing the fingers as she leaned forward slightly, looking around at her companions.

"All things considered, I can only think my family fortunate," she said, "although I admit, I would have preferred if *we* had made the decision...but yours, Europa – "

Europa gave a loud snort of disgust.

"Of all the people to foist on us," she scoffed. "Could've been a Nott, or Jeremias's son – maybe even the Zabini boy – but a *Yaxley*?"

"The Yaxleys are an esteemed family," Antony pointed out quietly, his tone forcibly level.

"And any relation of Corban Yaxley is a seedy, moralless rat, just like him," spat Europa.

Antony opened his mouth, ready to say something else, but Europa shot him down.

"Don't try to talk me down, Antony. I've worked with the man for four months now – there's no

shred of honor or shame in his entire being! I may be a lawyer, but even *I* have my limits. Yaxley doesn't give a Snitch about law or tradition: he'll convict people even when his own arguments make no sense at all! He doesn't even *try* to convince anyone – he just goes through the motions, accusing people without cause, condemning them without proof, *lamenting* the fact that an underage witch wasn't subjected to the Dementor's Kiss, when it was clear from her testimony that she was the smartest girl in that courtroom – ”

“*Europa*,” Cadoc cut her off. Rather than his interruption holding any sort of reproach, however, it felt more like a set of arms gently holding her back before she got into a fight, and Europa visibly relaxed, her green eyes narrowing upon the table in front of her.

Narcissa's eyes flickered with pity. “I'm sorry, Europa. I can understand why you wouldn't want to call Corban family...but perhaps his nephew hasn't followed his example.”

Europa snorted. “Forgive me if I'm not optimistic.”

“I'm afraid I must agree with Europa, Narcissa,” Cadoc said levelly. “The boy's father is Corban's twin brother, and the Yaxleys are far more like the Carrows than the Blacks: most of them are cut from the same cloth.”

Theia's light blue eyes flashed. “*Excuse* me?”

“I said *most*,” Cadoc said coolly. “Hyperion is an exception, after all.”

Theia still looked quite angry, but Antony took hold of her hand resting on his arm, squeezing it gently to soothe her.

“Have you spoken with Daphne yet?” Narcissa asked gently.

“No,” said Antony gravely, glancing at his wife. “We...have not yet decided how to broach the subject.”

Theia's hands were shaking as she glared at her reflection in the polished dining table.

“How could Etienne *dare* to – ” she whispered furiously. “How could he have *possibly* – ”

“I admit, the decision baffled me too,” said Europa, glancing at Narcissa out the side of her eye. “Any thoughts?”

Narcissa shook her head. “All I could come up with is that it may not have been Montmercy’s idea...meaning there’s only one person who could’ve suggested it – ”

“*I WON’T LET AMYCUS LAY A FINGER ON MY DAUGHTER!*” Theia abruptly burst out.

“Theia – ” Antony started, trying to soothe her, but Theia overrode him.

“I don’t *care* if Amycus’s father married his cousin when he was sixteen, I am *NOT* going to give my Daphne away to a Death Eater, let alone my disgusting, perverted, half-wit Death Eater cousin, especially when he’s more than *TWICE HER AGE!*”

Her light blue eyes flared with a kind of rage no one in the room had ever seen on the refined Greengrass’s face. It almost made her resemble Amycus for a fleeting second. Antony brought his arms tightly around his wife, pulling her to his side in a desperate attempt to comfort her as she bit back furious tears.

Narcissa watched the two solemnly, her blue eyes rippling with several emotions. She took a deep breath and then spoke deliberately.

“...I know...these matches weren’t what any of you expected...just as this entire situation we’re now in is not what any of you expected. This world...the one that we championed, and thought we wanted...isn’t what any of us expected. ”

The Bulstrodes and Greengrasses looked up at Narcissa as she eased herself to her feet.

“The reason Lucius is no longer with us...is because the Dark Lord betrayed him,” she said very quietly. “Lucius survived the explosion...but when he came before the Dark Lord, covered in Death’s Head acid, pleading for help...the Dark Lord turned his back on him...saying he’d failed him too many times...and left him to die.”

She'd yet to say this aloud to anyone before, and it made her heart pound in her chest anxiously. All four of her companions stared at her in horror and disbelief.

"Narcissa..." murmured Europa.

Narcissa's eyes filled with tears, but it made them no less resilient. Instead they only made the fire within their depths glint brighter.

"I called you here because I think all of you believe as I do – because we all have loyalties that are stronger than any we feel to the Dark Lord. Europa, Cadoc, you believe in law and order...Antony, Theia, you believe in your daughters. And I..."

Narcissa glanced over her shoulder.

Hanging at the back of the hall was the portrait that her mother had commissioned for her and Lucius's wedding. That day had been the happiest of Narcissa's life, and even though the portrait had deliberately tried to put Lucius and Narcissa in the grandest, most elegant light possible, that joy couldn't be completely blotted out of their eyes. Lucius looked so unbelievably handsome and their faces were so young and vibrant – the white of their dress robes only served to make them glow brighter.

"...I believe that Lucius deserved better," Narcissa said firmly, "that *Draco* deserved better – that they deserved to have their loyalty returned, by the people they fought alongside..."

Antony's dark eyes narrowed upon the back of Narcissa's head critically.

"Are you suggesting...that we *resist* the new regime? That we work against the Dark Lord and his followers? Their cause is something we all believe in, something we've believed since we were in school – the superiority of magical families – the inferiority of Muggles, half-breeds, and Squibs –"

"And yet Fenrir Greyback has been appointed leader of the Snatchers and the Senior Undersecretary is so close to being a Squib that he nearly didn't attend Hogwarts," said Narcissa lightly.

"Their record may not be flawless," granted Antony, "but is it not better than the alternative?"

As he said it, though, it was very clear he didn't believe a word of it.

"Antony, the Ministry has gone from bad to worse since the Dark Lord possessed Thicknesse and made him Minister," Narcissa said severely. "Even if we wish to ignore everyone they've arrested, they've been placing people in positions of power solely for their family name, regardless of their talents or opinions on the matter. They made you Head of *International Magical Cooperation* – you can't say you ever considered yourself the best choice for that? And Europa has been disgusted with the conduct in Madame Umbridge's court since she was appointed Head Scribe."

Antony looked away uncomfortably, clenching his jaw again. Cadoc glanced from Antony to Narcissa, his thin eyes unreadable.

"All right," the weedy, clean-shaven man said, his voice very slow and measured, "let's say, *hypothetically*, that we were concerned about the Ministry's current leadership – "

"As if you aren't," Theia couldn't help but snap.

"*Theia*," murmured Antony reproachfully.

Cadoc turned to Theia, his eyebrows rising daringly.

"You question our loyalty to the Dark Lord?" he asked coolly. "After all the cases my wife and I won to keep his once-supporters out of Azkaban?"

"There has been plenty of innuendo through the years about you and my brother, Cadoc, however discredited it has been through your dearest efforts," snarled Theia. "I daresay the Ministry's distaste for *alternative lifestyles* more than troubles you – that's why you and Europa bit the bullet and married in the first place, to avoid questions – "

Europa's green eyes flared dangerously. "Think wisely before you – !"

"Before I *what*, say what we all know is true?!" retorted Theia, her voice rising. "I frankly don't care how deep your desire is to avoid scandal, your husband is *no* place to play the saint when we all know he's as much a sinner as the rest of us!"

“*Theia!*” Narcissa said in a sharp, quelling voice.

Theia closed her mouth, but she and Europa still glared at each other fiercely across the table. Cadoc, for his part, looked remarkably calm; he silently studied his reflection in the polished surface of the dining table, his thoughts so deep you could practically see them running over his thin brown eyes.

Narcissa looked around at the others soberly.

“I am not looking for open rebellion: I’m not so foolish as to ask that. I only wanted us to meet so we could put our feelings out in the open, for our ears and eyes only...with the hope that, perhaps, if we came to an agreement on the state of affairs...we might know that at least we have *someone* on our side, should we need to defend the things we hold dearer than the Dark Lord’s will. I hoped that we might leave with the knowledge that should one of us need to stand up...there will be at least four others who will stand up with us.”

The Bulstrodes and Greengrasses all stared at Narcissa. It was strange; they had all gotten so used to seeing Narcissa as the matriarch of the Malfoy clan – the beautiful witch that stood behind the wealthy heir of Abraxas Malfoy. But in that moment, when her eyes gleamed with the nobility and drive of a queen, she almost looked like that dynamic, brilliant Seeker that had won over the hearts of every boy and girl in Slytherin house again.

“Narcissa,” Europa said solemnly, “what you’re suggesting is not just dangerous, it would constitute treason – enough to get us all sentenced to the Dementor’s Kiss...or worse, slaughtered in the dead of night without dignity or care.”

Narcissa’s blue eyes rippled grimly.

“I know,” she said softly.

Europa’s green eyes narrowed upon Narcissa’s face as her lips curled up in a slight smirk.

“Good,” she said lightly. “As long as you know the danger, I needn’t feel any shame about us skipping into Hell together.”

The heavyset blond witch reached out and brought a large manicured hand down on top of Narcissa's on the table.

"I'll stand, if you stand."

Antony and Theia glanced at each other, before Antony turned to Narcissa, his eyes hardening, and took her other hand.

"As will we."

Cadoc looked from Antony and Theia, to Narcissa, to Europa, his thin eyes very measured and thoughtful. Then his lips curled up in a small smile.

"I remember, once," he murmured, "Hyperion told me about Merlin and all of the wonderful things he'd learned about him. Mother and Father loved telling Europa and me stories about Merlin – how he was the greatest wizard in the world – the greatest Slytherin...but when Hyperion tells his stories..."

A wistful expression passed over his face.

"...It's like...he transports me there, every time."

Theia's face softened somewhat.

"...He is pretty good at that," she mumbled despite herself.

Europa smiled fondly at Cadoc as his face brightened.

"The story I remember most," said Cadoc, "was one I hadn't wanted to believe, at the start. In that story, Hyperion said that Merlin was once faced with helping a kingdom find their ruler. He could have bestowed it upon some wizard of noble blood, but instead he decided to restore the rightful heir to the throne, even if he was only a Muggle boy. Not only that, but he went on to teach that Muggle boy everything he knew about the world, about leading, about warfare – everything that boy would need to succeed."

Narcissa blinked in surprise.

“It was unbelievable,” said Cadoc, laughing despite himself at the memory. “*Ridiculous*, even – yet Hyperion stood by it. He showed me some of the old texts he’d found and translated the ones I couldn’t read, and sure enough...it was true. Merlin – the greatest Slytherin, the greatest wizard of all time – a symbol of the kind of power pure magical blood can wrought – protected, taught, and loved a Muggle boy as if he were his own son.”

Cadoc turned to Narcissa with new determination in his brown eyes.

“I’ve had doubts...perhaps more than any of you...yet I stood by these principles for years because I knew that if I played along with them – stood up for those who could later stand up for me – I’d earn the money and respect I needed to live the life I’ve always wanted. And I did. But after Europa and I reached our goal...we got comfortable, and I didn’t use the power given to me in any sort of meaningful way.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Europa dissented. “You defended that one wizard who wanted to circumvent his family’s marriage contract and marry the man he loved – ”

“Because I saw myself in him, Europa,” said Cadoc gently, “just as I’m quite sure you saw me in Bridget Jaheem.”

Europa looked down uncomfortably. After a moment, she spared a tiny nod.

“Now, like Merlin, we’ve been given a choice,” said Cadoc solemnly, “to stand with those who yearn for power, or to stand with those who deserve it. Perhaps this time we can actually make the right choice.”

He took Europa’s other hand, squeezing it tightly.

“We’ll leave you with the knowledge you hoped for, Narcissa.”

Narcissa’s blue eyes softened visibly, even as her lips curled up in a smirk.

“Thank you.”

Christmas

December 3, 1997

The list of Ministry match-ups was just released. Here's a copy – as to be expected, they're terrible.

MB

Daphne –

*The list can't mean Amycus Carrow as in your **teacher**, right?! Please tell me there's another Amycus Carrow, like a nephew named after him or something!*

Cho

Cho,

I'm afraid not. Amycus had me meet him after class today and pretty much confirmed it, saying he was looking forward to us “spending more quality time together.” I was just barely able to choke back the urge to vomit.

Honestly, I'd say none of the match-ups for us Slytherins are that good. I looked up some information on Millicent's partner, Gellert Yaxley, and it seems that Uric Cuffe just appointed him the new Senior Editor of the Stormer, since Cuffe himself has taken over the Prophet, so he's likely just as vile. Blaise's fiancée Euphemia Selwyn is a 40-year-old witch who's already lost two husbands and a stepdaughter – I don't doubt the match was inspired by how much Blaise's mother was suspected of “disposing of” her late husbands, and needless to say Blaise is a bit irritated. Pansy got what she wanted by being paired with Draco; unsurprisingly Draco's the exact opposite of enthused, but Pansy's too blind to see that. I assumed at first that Tracey would be the happiest of us, considering that she got paired with Vincent, but since the list was released, she's looked more ill than I've ever seen her. She's already skipped all of our classes today, as well as breakfast and lunch. I almost wonder if I should ask Koko to bring her some hot chocolate later...

I suppose we should just be glad that your luck was better than mine, Hannah. Boot certainly would never be my first choice, given his over-inflated ego, but at least he's not unpleasant to the eye.

Stay safe, everyone.

Love from

Daphne

Terry's decent enough, yes, but I don't think he wants to go along with the Ministry's decision anymore than I do. When we talked about it, he said that the pairings were so painfully heteronormative that they should be opposed just on principle, and I had to agree. (Terry also added that he was far too devilishly handsome to chain himself down to just one person anyway, which I think is going a bit far, but I think he was partially joking.)

Oh, but Daphne, I swear, if Amycus lays a single sour hand on you, I'll make him regret it! I might have to do it carefully, given the circumstances, but there's no way I'll stand by and let him treat you like you're some trophy!

Love,

Hannah

December 7, 1997

Today Dad, Dennis, Kevin, and I went to go pick up a Christmas tree! It took us a long while, but I finally found us the perfect one! Here's the picture we took – we just got it into the living room and we'll start decorating it this next weekend.

Cheers!

Colin

December 8, 1997

Christmas truly is in the air! Today Lalo, Amanda, and I drove around through various neighborhoods, looking at all of the amazing lights people have been hanging up on their houses. Some of them were just incredible – you can't tell from the pictures as they're Muggle photographs, but some were actually cued up to music, lighting up at various intervals. I particularly loved the second to last one with the train being driven by a hand-carved wooden Father Christmas (or "Santa Claus," as he's called here)! I remember a few months back Amanda said that Americans go all out for Christmas, and after seeing some of these city blocks here in Manhattan – wow, she wasn't kidding!

Lalo invited Amanda and me to go Christmas caroling with some of his buddies next week, so I'll have to brush up on my Muggle carols. Fortunately quite a few of them are very similar to ours (for instance "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" is "God Rest Ye Merry Hippogriffs," just with slightly different lyrics), so hopefully it won't take too long to get up to scratch!

Love,

Cho

December 12, 1997

The Daily Prophet published a horrible new article today about a "new discovery unearthed by the Department of Mysteries": an old tapestry with text that, when translated from runes, supposedly confirm the myth that wizards and witches were once the dominant race, with Muggles serving under them. It's supposedly from about nine hundred years ago and depicts a family carrying wands and a wand-less servant on bended knee holding a scroll, which both the Ministry and the Prophet are trying to spin as proof that Muggles were once subservient to wizards. The witches and wizards in the tapestry are even labeled as the Malfoy family! No one knows how real this tapestry is, but I don't believe it in the slightest – I wouldn't put it past the Death Eaters at the Ministry of making up evidence to prove their nonsense!

Miss you all so much!

Love,

Hannah

Hannah,

I'm suspicious too. The Department of Mysteries wouldn't put out that sort of broad-brush analysis, so any interpretation of the text would have to have been put out by the Minister of Magic and his Secretaries. From what I read as well, the only thing we can really tell is that the family is carrying wands and the servant is not: there's no evidence that that servant is even a Muggle at all, it might just be a wizard not holding a wand. Then of course there's the well-documented theory among magical historians that Muggles and wizards used to live alongside each other more easily in centuries past, meaning that it's possible that Muggles and wizards worked alongside each other in different combinations. There may well have been wizard servants serving Muggle families too!

I wish I could ask Papa about that tapestry, but I know he wouldn't divulge anything beyond what was already put out by the press. Even if not, though, I'm sure the truth about that tapestry will come out soon enough.

Regards,

Arjuna

Here's our tree, all finished! As you can see, Dennis, Kevin, and I decided to make our own popcorn garlands for it – I think they turned out great!

Cheers!

Colin

Here's a picture of the Christmas trees in the Great Hall for all of you, as well. Professor Flitwick's decorations are always so wonderful: I particularly love the charmed icicle garlands he added this year.

Love from

Astoria

December 13, 1997

Guys, this might sound crazy, but...I think Mr. Malfoy likes choir music!

Beau's been playing CDs from his days in King's College Choir for the last few weeks and telling us stories about his time there, and whenever he does, Mr. Malfoy always looks really surly. At first Trudy and I thought Beau's stories were bothering him, since Beau's a Squib talking about growing up with Muggles. BUUUUUT whenever Mr. Malfoy looks annoyed about Beau telling his stories, he always turns the volume up on the CD player to drown him out. Sometimes he even moves in a little closer to the speaker to hear it better. What if he's not trying to drown Beau out because of what Beau's saying, but because it's making it harder for him to listen to the music? I talked to Beau about it and he didn't seem entirely sure, but he tried to talk a little less at dinner tonight, and Mr. Malfoy looked to be in a much better mood. Noel still reckons it's just because Mr. Malfoy doesn't like socializing at all, especially with "low-class" people like us, but I think I'm right – I think Mr. Malfoy actually really likes Beau's choir, though I'm positive he'd never say so!

Speaking of Christmas, Trudy, Noel, and I surprised Beau by decorating the living room earlier today – here are the pictures we took! Noel is an amazing tree decorator: they had just the right instincts about where each ornament should be placed. Mr. Malfoy didn't join in and instead just kept messing with the old piano in the office, trying to tune it (more proof to my theory that he likes music!!), but when we were done, even he looked a little surprised by how good the tree looked. I also love the snow that Trudy enchanted onto the ends of the branches.

xxxxxx

Rose

December 18, 1997

Here's a cluster of mistletoe I snatched out of the rafters of the Slytherin commonroom today. Everyone was avoiding it (I don't think anyone's in much of a kissing mood these days), and I thought it might brighten up our books somewhat, so it seemed like a win-win.

Astoria and I will be going home for winter break this Saturday. It'll be really good to see Mother and Father, and hopefully Uncle Hyperion as well. Hannah, will you be able to sit on the train with Astoria again this time? I'll have to sit with Pansy again, and admittedly Tracey's still doing pretty badly, so I'd like to give her some support as well.

Love from

Daphne

I'm really sorry, Daphne and Astoria, but I've decided to stay at Hogwarts. Not only is Dad going to be working the entire time, but also Dumbledore's Army wants to make a statement during Christmas break, and I know Neville, Lavender, Terry, and Michael could use all the help they can get. There are probably going to be some students who can't go home for whatever reason, and if the Carrows and Snape are going to be around, they'll need some protection too.

Hope you two have a lovely holiday! You too, Millicent!

Love,

Hannah

December 20, 1997

Just got home about ten minutes ago. Mother and Father aren't here yet, but Lowry was excited to see me. Here's a picture.

I think she went a little overboard on the tinsel.

MB

Hahahaha! Lowry seems like a really cool elf, Millicent! I know your parents wouldn't likely want us coming over, but hopefully we'll get to meet her at some point.

I was able to get in touch with my brother Bill and his wife Fleur, and they're doing well. They've invited me for Christmas dinner at their safe house, Shell Cottage, but I don't think I'll stay that long, as I need to keep looking for Harry and Hermione. Still, it'll be nice to see them, even if just for a short while.

Happy Christmas,

Ron

Weasley,

My parents wouldn't have to know.

MB

December 24, 1997

Astoria and I just finished listening to the Potterwatch broadcast and, as to be expected, R.J. Moon and the Abraxans have done it again! The tapestry it turns out was real, but the conclusions the Ministry made about it were all wrong. The Abraxans were able to get a better copy of the picture taken of the tapestry and translate the text themselves. The piece commemorated the consecration of Malfoy Manor, and the Muggle was not a servant at all, but a messenger from the Muggle King William I, who had gifted Armand Malfoy the land! Yes – what this tapestry really proves is that the Malfoy family had links to Muggle royalty! I must wonder what Lucius Malfoy would say to that!

The next broadcast will be on January 3 – no doubt a proper birthday present, Millicent – and the password is “Fawkes.”

Love from

Daphne

P.S. Thought you'd enjoy seeing Astoria light the family menorah: it's at least two hundred years old and made of goblin-wrought gold, so Father's very proud of it. We'll be lighting the third candle tomorrow morning, once Uncle Hyperion arrives.

Just got the new Abraxan pamphlet from Dad! I hope to have all the copies I need by tonight, so I can post them all over the school, so everyone can see them! I'd say some truth in the midst of this War on facts would be the perfect Christmas gift!

Love,

Hannah

Happy Christmas Eve, everyone! Here's a picture of Pogo and Darcy hanging out under the Christmas tree – I think they're waiting for Father Christmas to bring them their presents! Mr. Whiskers has been kind of nervous around the tree (I think the blinking lights kind of confuse him), but he's taken to sitting in Trudy's lap sometimes when she's on the couch. I think he likes Trudy because she's really patient with him. Darcy tries to sit in Mr. Malfoy's lap sometimes too, but only ever when Mr. Malfoy's about to get up. It always irritates Mr. Malfoy, as Darcy is a lot heavier than Mr. Whiskers and he tries to stretch out and fill up your entire lap, but Noel thinks it's pretty funny. (I do, too, but of course I won't say that around Mr. Malfoy.)

xoxoxo

Rose

Once he'd finished reading the entries from the previous night, Colin closed his red scrapbook and left it on top of his nightstand, glancing out the window with a broad grin.

The front yard and the neighborhood beyond it had been covered with a perfect coat of Christmas snow the previous night. The pure, fresh white glistened in the morning sun, making each flake sparkle like a tiny diamond.

'This calls for pictures!' Colin decided instantly.

He snatched up his camera, which had been sitting on his nightstand next to his scrapbook, and tossed the strap over his head so it could dangle freely from his neck. Then he yanked on the red plaid coat he'd left dangling off his doorknob and darted down the hall to Dennis and Kevin's room. There he found his brother still fast asleep on the bottom of the bunk bed Mr. Creevey had set up for the two younger boys to share.

"Dennis!" said Colin loudly. "Come on, Dennis! Wake up!"

He grabbed hold of Dennis's shoulder and shook him. Dennis stirred groggily.

"Huh – wha – ?"

“Get up, slug-a-bug!” laughed Colin. “It’s Christmas! We’re going out in the snow!”

Colin climbed up on the edge of the bunk bed so he could reach the top, ready to shake Kevin awake too. When he looked over, however, he found the top bunk already empty, with its blankets and sheets neatly made.

“...Kevin?”

Colin looked down at Dennis, who was still half-asleep, with new concern.

“Dennis, did you see Kevin leave?”

Dennis blinked up at Colin in confusion, his brown eyes lighting up with consciousness for the first time. “...No...”

Colin immediately ran out of the room and down the hall, disregarding the pile of presents under the Christmas tree in the living room. He yanked open the front door, squinting through the light falling snow –

To his immense relief, he caught sight of a figure with dark curly hair trudging through the white, dressed in a teal-colored wool coat, a black turtleneck, jeans, and brown boots. The boy was packing snow together in a large rectangular shape, carving out window-like holes with his gloved fingers.

Colin felt his shoulders slack significantly.

For a second, he’d been terrified that Kevin had run away – gotten it in his head to find his parents on his own, without telling anyone where he was going. Colin had secretly been afraid of that for a while: after all, if *his* family had been attacked by Guilders, Colin could very easily see himself trying to go out and look for them, no matter how dangerous it might be or who might try to stop him. And since he’d arrived, Kevin had not talked at all about what happened: instead he’d bottled everything up, taking it all on himself and putting on a smile whenever he could...

Dennis appeared behind Colin. He was still dressed in his pajamas, but he’d pulled on a pair of boots and his brown coat and mittens.

“He’s making a snow fort,” said Dennis.

Colin nodded. “Yeah.”

For a moment the two brothers watched Kevin make his snow fort.

The Hufflepuff looked like he’d done it a million times before – his hands were so precise and his long-lashed eyes were so focused on his work that he never once looked up or took notice of Dennis or Colin. He patted the snow together and chiseled out details with his fingers, both flesh and wooden, until finally the fort was finished.

Kevin panted hard as he looked his work over, his dark eyes rippling with emotions that Colin could only partially recognize – exhaustion, confusion...pain. Then Kevin hung his head and, bending down slowly, crept into the small fort he’d made and sat down inside, hugging his knees. Colin could see him looking around at the walls of snow around him through the tiny window dug out of the fort.

“Is he okay?” whispered Dennis, glancing at his older brother worriedly.

Colin bit his lip.

He didn’t know. That was the worst part of this whole thing. He didn’t know what Kevin had gone through, or what he was feeling – he didn’t even know if Kevin was going to be okay. Kevin was his friend, and it felt so terrible, just standing back and saying that he’d be there if Kevin needed him, but never being taken up on the offer. It felt terrible having to just trust that Kevin would be okay, and not being able to do anything to make sure of it.

Clenching his jaw, Colin strode forward. His boots sank through the fresh, crisp snow with each step, burying his ankles in white.

CLOMP. CLOMP. CLOMP.

Finally Colin reached the snow fort and peeked in through the little window.

“Kevin?”

Kevin looked up, startled. Tears clung to his long eyelashes.

“Oh – Colin...”

He wiped his eyes on his sleeve quickly and immediately put on his best smile.

“Good morning!” he said. “Happy Christmas.”

“Happy Christmas,” said Colin, unable to keep the reluctance from his voice.

Dennis ran up behind his brother, stopping just to his left. Glancing at his younger brother uncertainly, Colin bent down so as to look at Kevin a little better through the open “doorway” of the fort.

“Is it...okay if we come in?” Colin asked hesitantly.

Kevin stared at the Creevey brothers. Then, his smile gaining a sad shine, he nodded.

“...Sure.”

With a weak smile, Colin crawled into the fort, with Dennis at his heels.

“Wow, Kevin,” said Dennis, impressed. “This is really incredible!”

“Thank you,” said Kevin. “I feel like I’ve done it before...though I think I had help, that time...”

His eyes flickered around at the walls, deepening with a kind of dark sorrow that resembled a

bottomless pit.

“...I don’t really remember,” he said, as he forced a casual smile back onto his face. “It was probably just a long time ago and I’ve forgotten. But it was nice to do it again!”

Colin wanted to smile, but seeing Kevin try so hard to shrug off his pain made it close to impossible.

“Well, it’s really cool,” the elder Creevey brother said, his expression stuck between a smile and a grimace. “I’ll definitely have to take a picture of it, to show the others.”

“Sounds good,” said Kevin. Despite his smile, the cheer never quite reached his eyes.

Dennis glanced from Colin to Kevin, his brown eyes narrowing slightly. Then a determined gleam shot through his eye.

“Say, I know – let’s make a snowman! Colin and I always make snowmen when there’s nice snow like this...and you’re awful good at sculpting things, Kevin, so I’m sure with the three of us, we’ll get one done in no time!”

So with a little coaxing, Colin and Kevin were brought back out into the snow by Dennis. The younger Creevey brother had a lot of difficulty packing the snow together in large enough balls, but with some help from Kevin, they were able to roll together a large enough base and then add the smaller balls for the middle and top. Then Dennis dashed off to find some tree branches they could use for arms, while Colin and Kevin put together the snowman’s facial features with pebbles and twigs.

Colin watched Kevin work. Just like before, he was concentrating hard as if he only had eyes on his work, yet his gaze seemed a thousand miles away.

“Kevin?”

The young Hufflepuff’s head shot up sharply when he looked up. He’d clearly been lost in his thoughts.

“Oh – yeah?” he said, smiling slightly at Colin.

Colin lowered the hand holding the pebble he’d been ready to add to the snowman’s smile.

“Kevin, I know...that you’re going through something bad. Something *really* bad, something worse than I could ever know. And I know...that you don’t want to talk about it.”

Kevin’s composure faltered visibly.

“I’m never going to force you,” Colin said quickly, his voice very vehement. “You’re my friend, and I would never want to hurt you! And what you went through hurt you – I’d never want to make you go through all that again! But – ”

He swallowed.

“...I worry about you, Kevin. A lot. You keep everything inside where I can’t see – I understand why,” he added defensively, as if afraid Kevin might try to interrupt, “but it’s made me realize... that I don’t know what you’re going through...and if you’ll be able to get through it alone...”

Colin forced himself to swallow back the clenching pain in his throat.

“I just want to know that you’ll be okay,” he said fiercely. “Can you promise me that? Can you *promise* me that you’ll be okay? You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to – you don’t have to share your burden – but can you promise me?”

Kevin’s dark eyes ran over Colin’s face, the emotions therein a muddle of reluctance, anxiety, pain, and regret. There was no trace of a smile now: his jaw was clenched tight. After a long moment, he looked down at his gloved wooden hand resting on their snowman’s back.

“...I promise,” he said very softly.

Colin’s shoulders relaxed. His eyes filling up with traces of tears, he reached forward with both arms, yanking Kevin into a huge hug. Despite being younger, Kevin was a good head taller than him, but Colin still hugged him the same way he would Dennis.

“I’ll hold you to it!” Colin said, his voice brighter than before. “No take-backs! You’re going to be okay!”

Kevin couldn’t help but choke back some laughter as he and Colin split apart.

“...Yeah.”

All of a sudden, a snowball soared through the air, colliding with the back of Kevin’s head.

“*Ow!*”

Kevin whirled around, to see Dennis holding a snowball and grinning from ear to ear.

“You look good in white, Kevin!” taunted Dennis. “You should wear it more often!”

He chuckled the other snowball at them and it hit Colin’s shoulder.

“Snowball fight!” crowed Colin.

He immediately bent down, scooping together his own snowball and threw it at Dennis, who dodged it with a laugh.

“Come back here, you coward!” yelled Colin.

Smiling too, Kevin crouched down and scooped up his own handful of snow.

“Watch out, guys!” he called ahead. “Here I come!”

He threw it with all his strength: Dennis gave a yelp and dashed out of the way, making it smash

into a tree, and all three boys laughed as their playful feud commenced.

Christmas morning was just as beautiful at Beau's house. As soon as everyone had woken up that morning and arrived at the kitchen table, Beau surprised everyone by not having breakfast ready for them at all, and instead immediately standing up and shoos them all into the living room.

"Wait by the tree!" he said brightly. "I'll be right there!"

He bustled back into the kitchen, singing "*Last Christmas*" cheerily to himself. Trudy and Noel exchanged a curious look as they settled down on the green frieze couch. Lucius plopped himself into the armchair by the window, crossing his arms moodily.

"What in the world is that boy up to?" he muttered.

With a smile, Rose sat on the rug between the couch and the armchair, stroking Mr. Whiskers, who was curled up on her shoulder, with the hand not holding him. She thought she knew *exactly* what Beau was up to, but didn't want to spoil the surprise.

A moment later Beau brought in a beautiful two-layer white-frosted birthday cake on a plate. It was decorated with cranberries placed in sweet holly-like clusters and covered in fifteen lit candles.

"*Happy birthday to you,*" sang Beau cheerily, as he put the cake down onto the coffee table in front of Noel.

"*Happy birthday to you,*" Rose and Trudy jumped in immediately, their faces bursting into grins. "*Happy birthday, dear Noel...*"

Noel looked from Beau to down at the cake in disbelief.

"*Happy birthday to you!*" Trudy, Rose, and Beau finished together, and they burst into applause. Mr. Malfoy halfheartedly gave three short claps as well, though he kept his gaze pointedly averted.

Their face darkening with a blush, Noel looked up at the group of them, dumbfounded.

“You – ” they stammered awkwardly, “but – I don’t understand...”

Beau laughed. “It’s your birthday, isn’t it? So you get a birthday cake. I originally thought to buy you one, but Rose insisted that she bake one herself.”

Noel blinked at Rose, startled. Despite the blush rising in her cheeks, Rose smiled broadly.

“It’s red velvet with a cranberry and vanilla butter cream,” she said quickly. “I wasn’t sure what flavors you’d like best, so I had to guess – I probably should’ve gone with chocolate or something, but well, I just thought it’d be fun...”

Noel’s eyes darted from the cake, to Beau, to Rose, and then back to the cake again. Then, very slowly, their lips curled up in a weak, almost stunned smile.

“...It’s beautiful, Rose,” they choked very softly.

Rose beamed. Trudy brought a hand onto Noel’s shoulder, squeezing it lightly.

“Don’t forget to make a wish and blow out the candles,” she said kindly.

Noel rubbed their eye quickly and then turned their focus back to the cake. Closing their eyes, they inhaled slowly and blew out all fifteen candles at once. Trudy and Rose applauded again, and Pogo barked cheerfully.

Swiping each of the unlit candles out of the cake and laying them down on the edge of the plate, Beau then got to his feet and strode over to the Christmas tree.

“Trudy, I don’t suppose you could summon the plates and forks I left on the table?” he asked offhandedly.

“Of course, dear,” said Trudy.

She raised her wand, and the aforementioned silverware and plates soared into the room, stacking themselves neatly next to the cake. Beau returned with four wrapped boxes in his hands and laid one each in his tenants' laps, starting with Trudy and ending with Lucius. Lucius gave a visible start when the present meant for him landed in his lap.

"There we go!" said Beau lightly, as he grabbed the footstool out from beside the armchair and plopped himself down on top of it. "Now we can unwrap some gifts, and then enjoy our lovely birthday cake breakfast."

Overcome with excitement, Rose immediately ripped open her box, yanking off the tape fastening the edges of the box. When she got it open, she pushed aside the white tissue paper and pulled out a small violet teddy bear with a light pink rose sewn into its chest.

"Aw, Beau!" cried Rose, hugging the little bear close. "She's so cute! I love her!"

Beau smiled. "Her name is Princess, according to the tag. She's a Beanie Baby, probably limited edition, but as soon as I saw the little rose, I knew she belonged with you."

Noel grinned at Rose as they unwrapped their gift: an odd-looking doll with pink hair, a mermaid tail, and colorful foam wings instead of arms, standing inside a plastic base decorated with two silvery dolphins and a blue ocean wave.

"It's called a Sky Dancer," explained Beau. "Pull the seahorse."

Curious, Noel yanked the little pink plastic seahorse on the back of the base. The seahorse was attached to a string, and in an instant, the doll in the base spun around in a rapid circle and flew up into the air with a soft *vroom*.

"Whoa!"

Pogo immediately shot to his feet, barking up at the flying toy as he bounded after it. Noel leapt out of their seat, dashing across the room and catching the winged doll in mid-air before Pogo could reach it.

“I figured I couldn’t give you anything to do with Quidditch or flying,” said Beau sheepishly, “but...at least *she* can fly, right?”

Noel glanced at Beau, surprised. Then they gave him their best smile.

“Thanks, Beau. It’s really cool.”

Trudy gave a quiet, happy gasp as she lifted an orange and blue silk scarf out of the box in her lap and gently wrapped it around her shoulders.

“Beau, this is *lovely*,” she said warmly, “thank you...”

Glancing around at the others with a frown, Lucius looked suspiciously down at the small blue-wrapped package in his lap. Beau offered him a hesitant smile.

“Go on ahead, Lucius,” he said kindly.

“Don’t prod me,” Lucius shot back coldly.

Finally, however, he unwrapped the present, ripping the paper open at the seams neatly and sliding the gift out of it: a CD.

“It’s Andrea Bocelli,” Beau explained quickly. His tone was a little higher and faster with nerves. “H-he’s a new artist, from Italy – he sang an *amazing* duet with Sarah Brightman last year – she’s a great singer too – anyway, he’s classically trained, and I figured since you seemed to like the stuff from my choir days, you might – ”

Lucius’s gray eyes shot up to Beau at once, narrowing sharply. “Did I ever say anything about *liking* your music?”

Beau faltered visibly. Rose’s stomach dropped.

“W-well, no – ” stammered Beau uncomfortably. “But you just – it seemed like you might enjoy

music, so I – ”

“Projected your interests onto me,” Lucius finished coolly.

Before Beau could say anything else, Lucius cut him off with enough disdain and finality in his tone to end the conversation completely.

“Thank you very much. Now if you don’t mind, I’m starving – if *cake* is all we have ready for breakfast, then I’ll have that.”

At Greengrass Hall Daphne and Astoria were having a wonderful time. Their Uncle Hyperion had spoiled his nieces with stories of his travels and the many wizards he’d befriended, preoccupying them almost the entire morning. It was almost lunchtime by the time Theia Greengrass finally forced her daughters upstairs to clean up and get dressed for the day.

As usual, Astoria finished getting ready long before Daphne did. She waited outside of her sister’s room for a few minutes, but soon found herself too excited to get back downstairs and hear the rest of Uncle Hyperion’s stories to wait around, so she strolled over to the top of the staircase, leaning over the railing to glance down at the empty floor below.

“...already told you?”

“Cadoc and I keep regular correspondence, Theia.”

Astoria’s ears perked up in slight interest. Hyperion usually avoided any sort of idle chitchat with Theia, unless it had to do with Astoria and Daphne’s education.

“Of course you do,” grumbled Theia.

Hyperion chuckled lowly. Then, after a moment, he spoke again.

“...I admit, sister dear, I wouldn’t have thought you and Antony *capable* of something this shady. I

thought you *believed* old Morty and his cock-and-bull rhetoric.”

“Watch your tongue!”

“What? Must I really put on airs? You must have at least *some* doubts, to even consider standing up to him.”

Astoria’s light blue eyes widened. ‘*What?*’

“Hopefully we’ll never be put in the position to choose between our beliefs and our family,” Antony said, keeping his voice forcibly stable. “But we at least know which one we’ll choose, if pressed – just as we always have.”

“I’m definitely grateful for that,” said Hyperion, and a dashing smile seemed to echo through his words. “After all, I’m *in* your family, and I don’t exactly fit the mold of a Death Eater – poorly educated, prone to violence, arrogant beyond reason – well, okay, that last one I come close to, but at least I’m *conscious* of it – ”

“*Hyperion*,” Theia reproached him sharply. “You never stay in one place longer than a week. Are you sure you want to place yourself in a position where you’ll have to drop everything to stand beside people who don’t necessarily *approve* of your life style? Do you think you even *can*?”

Hyperion was quiet for a moment. Astoria strained her ears, desperate to hear his response.

“Theia, I wander because I love my freedom more than anything,” he said softly. “It’s the reason I learn everything imaginable, so I can fit in wherever I am – talk to whomever I please. It’s the reason I got all O’s in school, so I could break away from the stereotype that all Carrows are backward twits. It’s the reason I ran away from home and refused to get married off to the highest bidder like you did...and it’s the reason I came back, once Mother and Father were dead and I never had to answer to anyone again.”

“Exactly,” said Theia coldly. “You always chose your freedom over everything else. How can we expect anything different now?”

“If you’d let me *finish*, please,” Hyperion shot back, his tone chilling significantly. “...I may love my freedom more than anything, but that doesn’t make me heartless. My heart is more than large

enough to love my freedom, as well as yours, your husband's, Daphne's, and Astoria's. Why else do you think I love sharing the things I learn? I want to give my freedom to you – to *share* it with you. And if the freedom of my loved ones is under threat, then I will defend it with a vengeance.”

He gave a short chuckle.

“Besides, Cadoc would probably never speak to me again if I didn't stand by him – hell, *I'd* probably never speak to me again.”

There was a pause, and then a shuffle. Then Theia spoke again.

“If you're standing with us, you'll need this.”

Astoria tried to peek over the railing, but all she could see were her uncle and parents' shadows. Theia had offered something to Hyperion, which he took with one hand and held up so he could get a better look at it.

“...The Moly plant?”

“We'll each keep one on the inside of our robes, so as to identify ourselves to fellow sympathizers,” said Antony. “I trust you understand the flower's meaning.”

“Naturally. A fitting choice, to represent such a faction.”

Astoria tried desperately to recall anything she knew about the Moly. Alas, Herbology was the one subject she'd always done poorly in, so it was proving difficult. She remembered that it was a white flower with a black stem and it was used in Wiggeweld Potions, but she couldn't for the life of her remember anything else.

Creak.

At that moment the door to Daphne's room opened. Astoria jumped, darting back away from the railing, as Daphne strode over, fully dressed in a light blue satin dress.

“Astoria?” she said, confused.

Astoria tried to shush her, but the adults downstairs had already instantly hushed, clearly having heard the faint stirrings upstairs.

“I’ll keep it safe,” said Hyperion softly.

Astoria stayed very still, praying beyond reason that the adults hadn’t figured out she’d been listening.

“Daphne? Astoria?” Hyperion called upstairs, sounding both louder and more jovial. “You about ready, little buds?”

Daphne glanced at Astoria hesitantly.

“...Yeah!” Astoria called back. “We’re coming!”

She turned to her sister and mouthed, “*Later.*” Daphne nodded firmly, and the two quickly dashed back down the stairs together.

At Hogwarts, things were far grimmer.

Early that morning, just as the sun was coming up, Argus Filch had caught Hannah Abbott out of bed. The caretaker had tried to escort her to Professor Sprout’s office, but on the way there, the two ran into Alecto in the seventh-floor corridor. Forced by circumstance to explain Hannah’s presence, Filch handed over the papers he’d caught Hannah posting on the walls.

Alecto’s light blue eyes darted across one of the pamphlets quickly, widening furiously with each line. Once she had finished, she looked up at Hannah with an expression that made her look half-mad.

“Where did you get this?” she hissed.

Hannah didn’t answer. Alecto whipped out her wand, and in an instant had lobbed a silent, scarlet hex right at Hannah’s face.

“AH!”

Hannah hunched in on herself, clutching her cheek. It was wet with blood – Alecto’s spell had cut through the skin.

“I said *where did you get this?*” Alecto shouted, her eyes bulging with fury.

Hannah was afraid, but she tried desperately not to show it.

She’d been the only one caught that night; Terry and Neville had been helping out too, but since the three of them had been closer to Ravenclaw and Gryffindor Tower when Mrs. Norris came around, they no doubt had made it back to their commonrooms safely. Hannah knew she would’ve felt so much braver if she hadn’t been facing Alecto on her own – if she had Susan or Ernie beside her – but she also knew that she couldn’t give Filch or *especially* the Carrows any reason to think she’d had help. If nothing else, her father had helped smuggle the pamphlets to her in the first place: now that she’d been caught, he would no doubt be questioned –

Still wincing in pain, the Hufflepuff prefect put on her most righteous glare as she faced Alecto.

“I sneaked out of school to get some shopping done,” she said lowly. “Someone left this on the floor of the Three Broomsticks, so I brought it back with me and made copies.”

Alecto’s light blue eyes flashed. “Liar!”

BAM.

Hannah was blasted clean off her feet and across the room. Her back collided sharply with a suit of armor, making it come crashing down in pieces as she landed on the floor. Filch flinched as Alecto strode past him, seized hold of Hannah’s Hufflepuff tie, used the grip to yank the younger girl up

onto her feet. The tie tightened around Hannah's neck and she choked in pain.

"There's no way you could've gotten out on your own!" Alecto spat. "The security around this school is impenetrable, and this *filth* –" she crumpled up the pamphlet with her free hand in front of Hannah's face, "– must have been brought in from outside! You must have had help – so *who gave it to you?!*"

Hannah choked, struggling to breathe despite the fabric clenched around her windpipe. Her eyes were filling up with tears and her heart was pounding with fear – but she knew she couldn't tell Alecto anything – not when her father and the D.A. were counting on her –

"N – no one!" she wheezed.

Alecto pulled harder on her tie, making Hannah gasp for air. Even Filch, who normally never was averse to seeing students suffer, looked notably anxious. He picked Mrs. Norris up off the ground, holding her close to his chest, and his wrinkled hands were trembling.

All of a sudden, out of nowhere, the hallway suddenly turned pitch black. Alecto gave an angry cry – then, abruptly, her grip on Hannah's tie disappeared –

Hannah coughed, clutching her bruised throat with both hands as she fell to her knees. A pair of hands came down on both of her shoulders and helped her stand.

"Come on," a soft, brave voice whispered in her ear urgently. "We have to move before the powder dissolves –"

Hannah blinked up through the blackness in confusion, struggling to see her rescuer, but it was impossible. She couldn't see a thing – so she just had to follow that brave voice.

"*UGH!*" screamed Alecto furiously. "*Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder!* I *knew* that you had help, Abbott – if you think you and your little *buddies* are going to get away, you've got another –"

"*Hurry,*" the voice said again. An arm wrapped around Hannah's shoulder, pulling her close to someone's chest.

Hannah was pulled into a run alongside the unseen stranger. The pair stumbled together through the darkness, as neither of them could see where they were going, but they were able to lean against each other to help stabilize their balance.

“We need to get you out of here,” said the voice tensely. “It’s not safe for you now – even if we were somehow able to alter Alecto’s memory, we couldn’t do it well enough that Snape wouldn’t suspect anything – ”

“But – ” stammered Hannah, “but my dad – if they know I’m responsible, then they’ll go after him – ”

“Don’t worry,” said the voice. “Terry’s already sending word to him – he’ll have the time he needs to get out – now we just need to get *you* somewhere safe – ”

Hannah’s brown eyes welled up with tears, her heart torn between relief and utter terror. She brought a hand up to her neck, which was still throbbing with pain, as she shot looks around at the blackened abyss beyond.

‘I need a place to hide,’ she thought desperately. She remembered the pictures Rose had taken of Beau’s living room, decorated with Christmas lights. *‘Somewhere the Carrows can’t find – ’*

All of a sudden a quiet cluster of music echoed to their left.

The pair froze mid-step. Through the slowly dissipating blackness, they could see the faint outline of a doorframe, illuminated by colorful, blinking Christmas lights.

“...A open door,” the voice beside Hannah whispered in realization. “Hannah – the Room of Requirement! It just opened a door – it’s giving you a place to hide!”

“*Where are you, Abbott?!’* shrieked Alecto’s voice.

Several red and white hexes shot through the darkness, smashing unseen windows. The brave voice’s owner immediately steered Hannah around, pushing her toward the open doorframe.

“Go, Hannah – she’s coming – ”

Just as he was about to let go of her, though, Hannah whirled around, brought a hand up through the blackness, and found his face.

“Neville...” she whispered, “...thank you.”

And she leaned in and kissed him full on the mouth.

When she pulled away, the darkness had dissipated just enough that she could see the outline of his shoulders, which were tensed up shyly. Smiling at him even though she couldn’t see him, Hannah trailed her hand down his cheek, and then turned on her heel and ran into the Room of Requirement.

It looked a lot like the photographs Rose had taped into their scrapbooks. It was warm and bright, with a small wizard radio playing carols on the floor beside a roaring fire, and it was covered ceiling to floor in multi-colored Christmas lights so intricately and beautifully hung that they looked like they could banish any hint of shadow or gloom.

Hannah grinned victoriously at the room and then faced the open door that led back into the blackened hallway.

‘Room,’ she thought firmly, ‘I need you to give Dumbledore’s Army’s members a safe route back to their common rooms.’

Now confident that Neville and Terry wouldn’t be caught, Hannah slammed the door behind her, blocking out the raging screams of Alecko Carrow still echoing down the hall.

A New Year

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December 25, 1997

Everyone –

Early this morning, Alecto caught me in the hallways while I was posting those copies of the Abraxans' latest pamphlet. Don't worry, I'm safe: the Room of Requirement conjured up a room for me to hide in, and Neville and Terry, who were helping me, got back to their dorms safely. Terry's also send word to Dad, and he'll be able to go into hiding too. But now I'll have to stay hidden here, to keep out of the Carrows' reach. Fortunately I was able to ask the Room to bring me my things, so I can still use my scrapbook.

This isn't exactly the way I hoped to celebrate Christmas, but I know I have to count my blessings. It could've been so, so much worse.

I love you all! Happy Christmas!

Hannah

Hannah,

That was unbelievably reckless! I swear, when I next see Longbottom, I'll hex him into next week for coaxing you to stick your neck out like that! You needn't have posted anything – just throwing the pamphlets around the school nice and quick would've more than gotten the message out, and you would've been far less likely to get caught! Thank goodness you're all right...

Astoria and I also learned something very interesting: it seems that our parents might actually be working against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in secret! Astoria heard Mother and Father talking with Uncle Hyperion about it: we didn't catch that many details about what they're doing, but from the sound of things, your father might be involved too, Millicent. (At least Astoria heard them mention a "Cadoc.") The group's symbol is the Moly flower, which can be used to counter Dark magic: Uncle Hyperion said it was "appropriate," and I think I can see why.

Stay safe, everyone - Hannah, you especially.

Love,

Daphne

Daphne,

Leave Neville alone. He'd never leave anyone behind, and that includes Hannah. What happened was clearly unavoidable and they did the best they could. I can't believe your parents and the Bulstrodes are working against You-Know-Who, though – I guess the Death Eaters can't even keep their own people happy...

At least the Room of Requirement should be able to conjure up just about anything you need, Hannah, and you'll be more than safe in there. I mean, Harry tried all year to get it to show him what Malfoy was doing with the Vanishing Cabinet, and he couldn't manage it – the Carrows are a heck of a lot dimmer than that, so I'm sure it'd take them far longer to crack that Room, even if they do figure out you're hiding in there.

Stay strong!

Ron

Daphne, I understand you're worried, but Ron's absolutely right. When Alecto caught me, I had no way out, but Neville came back for me and threw some Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder into the hall so he could help me escape. If he hadn't been there, I don't know where I'd be now.

Hannah

Dear Hannah,

I'm so glad you're all right, too. Yes, perhaps it was a little reckless, but it was very noble of you to want to get the information out. I'm sure the Abraxans are grateful to know you wanted to help spread their work...but I am sorry that this whole thing has placed you and your father in such a position. You and he are in my prayers!

Be safe,

Arjuna

P.S. Stori, Daphne, if you find out anything else about this “group” your parents are part of, let me know! I’m really intrigued, especially by the use of the Moly plant as their symbol. I looked it up in the Herbology books in Mama’s library, and it’s closely related to a non-magical flower called the Snowdrop, which can bloom in the dark of winter. (Isn’t that appropriate!) If only your parents’ group and the Abraxans could team up, then the truth could really start to get out...

Daphne –

If your uncle was talking about my father, then my mother is also involved. They always do things as a set. But I don’t see what would be in it for them, to fight against You-Know-Who – it’s not like their daughter got assigned to marry their perverted cousin.

MB

December 26, 1997

Happy Boxing Day, everybody! Here are some pictures I took of Kevin, Dennis, and me playing in the snow yesterday. As you can see, Kevin’s amazing at building snow forts! The snowman we did together: I call him Sir Frostington the Third! (He’s the third because there are three of us. Kevin laughed at me for that, but I don’t care, I think it suits him!)

Cheers!

Colin

Yesterday was Noel’s birthday too, so I baked them a birthday cake! Noel really, really liked it – I

don't think they've ever had a birthday cake before, so I'm glad they enjoyed their first one. Mr. Malfoy was nasty as always, but at least he was decent enough to compliment the chocolate and Nutella Yule Log I'd made for our Christmas dinner. I'm still kind of annoyed that he couldn't at least be a little nicer on Christmas, though.

Anyway, I love you all! Write back soon!

xoxoxo

Rose

December 28, 1997

*I came across this while I was out looking for Harry and Hermione. Seems the Daily Prophet has something else "fresh out of the Department of Mysteries" it wants to promote. This time it's an old book written by Muggles about how to identify and kill witches, which was according to the Ministry used to "slaughter thousands." But I mean, come on, even **I** know it was more complicated than that, and I slept through almost all of History of Magic! Sure, the "witch trials" stuff doesn't exactly make the Muggles look that good, given that they accidentally killed a lot of their own people too, but the Ministry's trying to use it as rationale for us bringing all Muggles to "justice" for it. God, I can just imagine how angry Dad must be right now, reading all this tripe...*

Later,

Ron

December 31, 1997

Just about to set off for Times Square with Amanda, Lalo, and Lalo's friends Tony and James, but I wanted to write you guys something quickly before I left –

1997, the worst year of our lives, is almost behind us. Let us, at least for now, put the memory of that year behind us, and chase a better one in 1998! A happy end is out there: we only have to believe in it and work to make it come true.

Always remember, no matter how much time passes, I love you all so much, and I believe in you with all of my heart.

Love,

Cho

January 1, 1998

HaPpy New Year, everyone! COlin, DenniS, and I stayed up all night baking you all a surprise – a Set of four chocolate and orange pound cakes, carved into each digit. The “9” cakes were The hardest, given that the weight had tO be mostly on top, so I had to jerry-rig some “stilts” to put inside so that they’d stay upright.

May this year be mUch better than our last!

K evin

The end of winter break came too fast for all of Hogwarts’s students, as well as their families. As everyone gathered again at Platform 9 ¾, many parents and children clung to each other, sobbing openly as they prepared for their inevitable separation.

Draco did not cry when he approached the Hogwarts Express, his mother Narcissa at his side, dressed in a long black dress decorated with dark green embroidery. He glanced around, his gaze purposefully stony upon the familiar flood of faces.

The first-year Ravenclaw boy that Draco had demonstrated the Cruciatus Curse on was trying desperately to comfort his mother while also trying not to cry himself. A fourth-year girl that Draco thought he recognized from the Hufflepuff Quidditch team was hugging her little brother and rocking him gently back and forth as tears streamed silently down her face. Just beyond them, Astoria and Daphne Greengrass were saying goodbye to their parents.

Mrs. Greengrass had her elder daughter’s arm in a vice grip, as if terrified to let her go. Her dark eyes full of pity, Daphne gently pried herself loose, whispering words of comfort in her mother’s ear. As Mrs. Greengrass blinked back tears, Astoria moved forward and kissed both of her parents goodbye, before Daphne took her sister’s free hand and the two walked together up to the train, the cages containing their owls swinging back and forth in their opposite hands.

Draco's gaze lingered on the Greengrass sisters until they had boarded the train and disappeared from sight. Then he turned to his mother.

"I'd best be off," Draco said quietly.

Trying desperately to hide the reluctance he felt, he swallowed, his gray eyes flickering back up to the white smoke billowing out of the scarlet steam engine. There was no point in dawdling. The longer he thought about it, the less he'd want to go back – to crawl back into that wolves' den –

"Draco, wait."

Narcissa took hold of his shoulder. Draco stopped abruptly, and Narcissa came around to stand in front of him.

"You'll need this," she murmured gravely.

She undid the front of Draco's cream-colored wool coat, opening it up so that the black silk lining was visible. Then, taking something out from inside of her robes, she fastened it onto his interior coat pocket: once her hands fell away, Draco could see it was a pressed white flower with a black stem decked in thorns.

"Mother?" said Draco, confused.

Narcissa looked up at him, her eyes narrowed seriously.

"This flower," she said very quickly and quietly, "is a symbol. The only ones wearing it are friends of our family: friends and allies, who will be in our corner, should things get bad."

Draco stared at his mother in disbelief.

"*Our* corner?" he whispered. "Our corner as in – instead of the – ?"

Narcissa brought a hand up to Draco's cheek, her thumb sliding over his mouth briefly to quiet

him.

“They’re our kin – Merlin’s Kin. Our faction may be small, but we aim to keep it that way, lest the wrong sort catch wind of it. After all...*he* is only assured of our loyalty because he believes our fear is stronger than any shred of hope we might harbor.”

“*Hope*” – the word rang strangely in Draco’s ears. What hope could there possibly be? The Dark Lord had already won – Hogwarts, the Ministry, the whole of Wizarding Britain, was in his grasp...

Narcissa’s smile faded, and her face grew much more stern.

“But Draco...only share our symbol if you’re *completely* sure that person is in our corner, rather than *his*. All right?”

Her voice was amazingly level considering how pale her face had become. She was clearly terrified, not just of what she was doing but of sharing it with her only, beloved son.

Draco’s gray eyes ran over his mother’s white, but determined face critically. She clearly thought there was still a chance for...*something*. He didn’t know what, and he wished he understood why she could even fancy that chance...but, he concluded, there was no time to interrogate her on the matter. So however much he didn’t understand Narcissa’s sentiment, he bowed his head in a single nod.

“Yes, Mother,” he whispered, his voice as grave as hers had been.

Narcissa smiled weakly. Then she brought both of her arms around Draco and embraced him fully, trailing a hand through his pale blond hair.

“Oh, Draco,” she mumbled, “my brave son – please, *please* be safe...”

Draco held her tightly in return, burying his face into the crook of her neck to hide the pain in his expression.

“...I know, Mother.”

The train whistle gave a low *toot*. Narcissa and Draco broke apart, and the young man hurried to climb on board the train as it started to pull out of the station. Rather than hurrying to find a compartment, however, he lingered in the doorframe, watching his mother on the platform slowly shrink into the distance, until the train went into a darkened tunnel and she was out of sight.

January 3, 1998

Happy birthday, Millicent! I'm taping in your present: Kevin remembered that you wanted to buy a new cat soon, so we figured that cat could use a nice collar! Hope purple's an okay color!

Cheers!

Colin

Dear Millicent,

Happy birthday! Hope you have a nice day today – I wish so much that I could be with you for it!

Dobby the house elf stopped by today in the Room of Requirement to give me some food and news. Apparently the Carrows are cracking down even more – they want to weed out any and all Dumbledore's Army members in case they try to pull anything. I'm really worried about Neville and the others. If they get caught too, I'd never forgive myself...

Dobby also said that Luna hasn't returned to school! Neville and Ginny are really worried; they've tried sending her letters, but we all know that the OPS is still watching, so they have no idea if their attempts will come to anything. I really hope she's all right...

Love,

Hannah

Colin - thanks for the collar. Daphne, Astoria, and I met down in the kitchens tonight and baked a cake together. (Vanilla and chocolate decorated with mint macaroons. No, you may not have any.)

Tracey Davis hasn't returned either. I don't think her reasoning is the same as Lovegood's, though – Blaise heard that she ran away from home. Even Tracey's parents have no idea where she is, though the Ministry plans to interrogate them anyway.

MB

Happy birthday, Millicent – hope that cake was as delicious as it sounds!

Update from Potterwatch, for those who couldn't tune in: the Abraxans are already working on their flier dismantling the Prophet's recent article (the one you taped in, Ron), and they hope to have it ready by next week. It's also been leaked that Thicknesses's inner circle is growing increasingly tense about all of the leaks coming out of the Ministry. Dolohov and Montmercy have been threatening their employees to keep their mouths shut, but it only serves to make people talk more. I don't know about you, but I think such tyrannical blowhards failing so utterly to tamp down their subordinates is very satisfying!

Next broadcast will be on February 28, and the password is "Sirius."

Regards,

Arjuna

With a slight frown, Rose closed her scrapbook and looked up.

The room she shared with Trudy was pitch-black and silent except for the sounds of Trudy breathing and Mr. Whiskers prowling quietly around the ladder leading to the trapdoor that led to the main house.

Rose brushed her brown hair out of her eyes and glanced down at the pink watch on her wrist: 1:16 AM.

'Wow, how'd it get so late?' she thought.

She put down her scrapbook, turned over, and tried to get to sleep. Alas, the thought of more people disappearing and Hannah stuck in the Room of Requirement just kept turning and churning inside her, and her brain just would not shut off and let her sleep.

Rose's restlessness finally got the better of her. Being careful to be quiet so as not to disturb Trudy, she eased herself out of bed and crept across the room to the ladder. Scooping up Mr. Whiskers in one hand, she ascended the ladder and popped out of the trapdoor in the staircase, hoisting herself up and out onto the main floor. Once she closed the trapdoor behind her, she headed for the living room.

Click, clack, click, clack, click, clack.

Rose looked up to see Pogo striding over to her, his nails tapping the hardwood floor of the hallway with each step.

"Hi, Pogo," she whispered with a small smile.

She gave his left ear a scratch, but the golden retriever seemed oddly distracted. He kept glancing toward the kitchen and then back up at Rose, his paws clapping against the floor as if he were an anxious horse. When Rose looked down the hall, she quickly figured out why. The lights were off in the kitchen, but the softest sound of music emanated from it.

Curious, the little Hufflepuff inched closer and peeked inside.

Sitting alone at the dining table was Lucius. He was still fully dressed in the high-collared black dress robes he'd worn earlier that day rather than his usual nightwear, and he'd moved the CD player Beau usually kept on the kitchen counter onto the table next to him. The Malfoy patriarch had his eyes closed and his arms crossed, but he was clearly not resting: his head was turned toward the speakers, tilting slightly in response to certain notes. His focus was solely on the music being played, which sounded very operatic and had lyrics that Rose guessed were Italian. The thing that surprised Rose most, however, was the expression on Lucius's face as he listened. All hint of restraint or coldness had been completely wiped from his pale features. His eyebrows were slightly raised, his lips were slightly parted, and his shoulders were slightly tense. When the aria ascended toward a thrilling climax, his head fell back a bit, as if he were readying himself. Once it came, striking a beautiful high note, Lucius froze stock-still, drinking it in – and when it was over he exhaled heavily, the corners of his parted lips turned up in a breathy, white smile.

Rose stared in disbelief. Lucius Malfoy was *smiling*?

Lucius very slowly opened his eyes, the smile still clinging to his lips. When he did, however, he immediately locked eyes with Rose and he froze, all joy from his face dissipating instantly.

“What are you doing here?” he said, taken aback.

“Couldn’t sleep,” Rose said quickly. “I just thought I’d play with Pogo and Mr. Whiskers for a bit, but Pogo was a little more focused on you.”

She indicated the golden retriever, who cheerfully bounded up to Lucius’s side and plopped himself down on the floor next to him, his wagging tail slapping the floor to a steady beat. Lucius eyed the dog dully.

“...So he is,” he muttered.

The next song began to play; in response, Lucius quickly smacked the “stop” button on the CD player to shut it off. Rose looked from the black box to the flustered wizard, her blue eyes narrowing slightly.

“Looks like Beau’s present wasn’t so against your tastes after all,” she said. Despite the bluntness of her tone, it wasn’t at all confrontational.

Lucius frowned deeply but didn’t reply. He kept his gray eyes averted, looking almost ashamed through all of the pride and irritation.

Feeling a bit of pity despite herself, Rose eased herself down into her chair at the table, which was just to the left of Lucius’s, and put Mr. Whiskers down on the floor so he could prowls around on his own.

“I was the one who told Beau you might like his music, you know,” she said stridently. Lucius looked up at her out the corner of his eye. “I saw how grumpy you got whenever Beau was telling his stories – how you’d turn up the music so you wouldn’t have to hear – and I thought that if it was just an issue of you not liking what Beau was saying, you’d just...leave.”

Rose's feet dangled off her chair loosely as her eyes migrated to the ceiling.

"Then of course you've been playing with that old piano a lot. Trudy guessed that your father might've made you take lessons when you were a kid, but – "

"Father didn't make me take them."

Rose blinked. Lucius shifted slightly in his chair so that he was more properly facing Rose, resting both of his fake arms down on the table.

"I begged him for eight months for organ lessons," he said carelessly. "I begged him for five more for voice lessons. And I only received both because Mother finally went over his head and hired teachers for me."

Rose stared at Lucius. Then her lips curled up in a stunned, disbelieving smile.

"Then...you *do* like music."

"*Like* it?" repeated Lucius, his tone so brusque it sounded close to a scoff. "I performed my first concert at age nine. I joined Maestro Gamp's Young Wizards Choir at twelve. I was the star tenor of Professor Capella's Music class since my very first day of third year. Why, at one point, Horace Slughorn boasted that I could have my share of venues across the Wizarding World, if I so chose."

Rose's eyes lit up. "You must be a really good singer, then!"

Lucius's bravado faltered somewhat.

"Well, I – I have not sung professionally in quite a few years," he said uncomfortably.

"Why not?" asked Rose with a frown.

Lucius's expression became much more jaded. "I had responsibilities to attend to – obligations to meet. Music is...well, it's all well and good, as pastimes go, but...one can't build a life on it – not

for yourself, or for those who rely on you. You can't make suitable money, chasing impractical dreams such as those."

The words sounded like they should've been appropriate to Lucius, but they seemed to come out awkwardly when he said them aloud. It took time for him to conjure up each phrase, and when he actually said each one, it came out in a forceful rush. It almost felt like he was spewing a sentiment that had previously belonged to someone else.

"So you quit for your family?" Rose said slowly. "For your wife and son?"

"No," said Lucius, his tone turning suddenly very harsh. "Just – just let it be, bantling – it's something you wouldn't understand."

Rose frowned deeply as Lucius turned away. He was right – she *didn't* understand. But it wasn't for lack of trying: Lucius just didn't make himself very easy to understand!

Pogo plopped his furry head in Lucius's lap, gazing up at him with morose brown eyes. Rose leaned back in her chair, kicking her feet lackadaisically.

"...Your mum gave you lessons, though...so I guess *she* liked music."

Lucius's expression shifted slightly, turning much more pensive. "Well, love of the arts has always been more of an Abbott family trait than a Malfoy one. Mother's great-great-grandfather even helped compose several Christmas carols. '*God Rest Ye Merry Hippogriffs*,' '*Dragons We Have Heard on High*,' '*I Saw Three Wands Come Rising Up*' – all his."

Rose gave a start. "Wait – you're related to the Abbotts? Hannah's family?"

"Of course – all Pureblood families are related, however distantly," Lucius said matter-of-factly. He patted the top of Pogo's head to make the dog stop sniffing at his leather hand. "What, haven't you noticed how few of us there are – how much your lot has overrun them –?"

"What was your mum like?" asked Rose curiously. In her mind's eye she tried to imagine an older woman with Hannah's beautiful smile and blond hair dressed in severe black robes like the kind Lucius would wear – the image seemed surreal and strange.

Lucius considered Rose for a moment, his gray eyes rippling like storm clouds too thick to read. Finally, keeping one hand resting on top of Pogo's head to settle the dog, he raised his other hand up to the side of his dress robes, reaching around inside until he'd slipped out an intricately carved silver pocket watch. On the front was a shield-like family crest flocked by two winged dragons and marked with a cursive "*M.*"

Lucius clicked open the watch. Inside was a moving portrait of him and a pale, slender woman with pinned-up blond hair and a sophisticated, stoic face dressed in white, holding a grumpily pouting toddler in her arms. He considered the portrait for a short moment, before he closed the watch and then opened it back up again. This time he handed the watch to Rose so she could look inside.

"There you are."

Rose blinked in surprise.

The portrait inside had changed – it'd taken her a minute to realize it, given how similar the men and boys looked, but once she'd seen the woman in this picture, she realized this was a completely different family. The man was pale with long, blond hair tied into a ponytail like Lucius, but his eyes twinkled merrily as he adjusted his collar and smoothed out the wrinkles in his sleeves. The boy was grumpy, yes, but he kept glancing up at his parents hesitantly, as if awaiting direction. Unlike the slender blond woman that had to have been Narcissa Malfoy, this woman was smaller and less imposing. She was just as pale as the rest of her family, with reddish blond hair and cherubic blue eyes, and she'd colored her lips a bright red that made her look like a child trying on her mother's makeup for the first time. Still her posture was as straight as a queen's and her eyes were oddly powerful in their gaze despite the sweetness of their shape.

"She's beautiful," said Rose.

Lucius looked from Rose to down at the portrait inside his watch.

"She was also brilliant," he said softly. "One of the sharpest witches of her age. She was in the running to become Minister of Magic, at one point...though of course the Wizengamot decided to pass her over for that Mudblood Nobby Leach."

He suddenly looked like he'd swallowed a lemon.

“His supporters published some of her private letters and used them to smear her. After her defeat and the humiliation that came with it, Mother withdrew from public life completely. She grew very ill, and several years later, she passed away – died of a broken heart.”

Rose looked up at Lucius.

“...That’s terrible,” she said quietly. “It must’ve been really hard, for you and your dad...”

She glanced down at the man who had to be Abraxas Malfoy.

It was strange – in the portrait of Lucius and his wife, the two had constantly been glancing at each other, sharing subtle smiles and glances...but in this portrait, Abraxas never looked at his wife and son once. He was too focused on his own appearance and on charming someone out of frame: likely the person taking the picture.

“Father was never the same again,” said Lucius darkly.

He held his hand out; Rose placed the pocketwatch back into his awaiting palm, and he closed it with a *snap*.

“It’s past your bedtime, bantling,” he said brusquely, and he slipped the watch back into his robes. “You should be in bed.”

Rose crossed her arms, smiling wryly at Lucius. “If you want to end a conversation, there are better ways to do it, you know.”

Lucius shot her a sardonic look over his shoulder. “Back-talk won’t change my mind. Run along.”

Rose giggled to herself as she got up and walked across the kitchen, scooping up Mr. Whiskers as she went.

“Good night, Mr. Malfoy.”

As she left down the hall, she just barely caught the quietest of responses.

“Good night.”

At daybreak Rose was woken out of a sound sleep by Noel shaking her.

“Rose! Rose, get up!”

“Huh?”

Rose blinked sleepily up at Noel. They were still dressed in their light blue nightdress and their face was very white and stunned, making them resemble Mr. Whiskers whenever he got scared of his own shadow.

“Rose, come on – you’ve got to see – ”

Noel took her arm and pulled her along after them up the ladder and into the living room. As soon as they reached the landing, the sound of music rippled through the air, but this time it didn’t sound like the Italian songs Lucius was playing on the CD player. It sounded like a piano and a man singing alongside it.

*“Wizards, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be
Which inspire your hopeful song?”*

*Gloria...in excelsis filis...
Gloria...in excelsis filis...”*

The voice was a little out of breath, likely out of lack of use, but otherwise flawless. Its tone was precise and full, and every note was perfectly pitched: the vocalist no doubt had been excellently trained.

Suddenly feeling much more awake, Rose followed Noel down the hall and into the office. Trudy stood in the doorway, still in her peach-colored dressing gown and covering her mouth with a hand in visible surprise. Just past her was Beau, fully dressed in black slacks and a white collared shirt, who stood just behind Lucius as the older man played the melody on the piano, which sounded better than it ever had previously.

Just as Noel and Rose entered the room, Lucius stopped and looked over his shoulder at Beau. Then, very slowly, he got to his feet, facing his host with a solemn expression.

“Mr. Plumpton,” Lucius said stiffly, “I believe I...owe you an apology.”

Everyone was startled, most of all Beau. Lucius pressed on stubbornly, choosing not to look at anyone other than Beau while he proudly forced out everything he needed to say.

“I expected that, given our respective *backgrounds*, any gift you would bestow, you would bestow out of obligation, rather than any sincere sentiment. I’d not deserved any genuine generosity, and because I presumed that, I ended up not being worthy of it when you – for whatever reason – expressed it. Your gift was...quite thoughtful. I can see why you spoke highly of Mr. Bocelli.”

Beau’s eyes widened slightly. “You liked him?”

Lucius looked so taken aback by the question that he almost looked offended.

“His voice is *flawless*,” he shot back before he could stop himself, “of *course* I liked him.”

Beau’s face flushed with pride. Rose grinned from ear to ear. Suddenly realizing how forward he’d been, Lucius looked away, clearing his throat.

“He clearly must have some magical ancestry somewhere,” he said dismissively, “though of course natural talent without training is tantamount to nothing.”

“He must have been trained very well, yes,” granted Beau.

A smile pricking at his features, the Squib considered Lucius critically.

“Well...since you play so well, maybe we could perform something together sometime. I have some old sheet music here somewhere, from when I was in King’s College Choir...”

He got down on his knees, shuffling around under the desk to the left of the piano. After a few minutes, he found what he was looking for: an old file full of sheet music.

“Here we are!” said Beau. “God, I haven’t used these in years! *‘Pie Jesu’ – ‘Once in Royal David’s City’ – ‘O Holy Night’ –*”

“I know that one,” Lucius said sharply. “Hand it here.”

Beau fished out the small, stapled stack of sheet music and placed it in Lucius’s outstretched hand. The pale-haired man ripped the stack apart so that the sheets were loose and spread them out over the top of the piano. As he looked over them, he frowned, his brows coming together tightly over his eyes.

“Seems the writer transcribed the song incorrectly,” he muttered in confusion. “The lyrics are all wrong.”

Trudy came over to look over Lucius’s shoulder and slid her reading glasses on so as to better read the pages.

“Oh – *no*, Lucius,” she laughed. “It’s just the Muggle version. The wizard version goes a little differently, that’s all.”

“It does?” asked Noel, both confused and a little curious.

“Yeah!” chirped Rose. “Cho mentioned once in her letters that a lot of wizard carols are similar to Muggle ones, just with different words.”

Still frowning, Lucius tested out some of the notes on the piano. After a moment, he’d gotten the rhythm of the accompaniment correct. Beau rocked on the balls of his feet lightly, following the

beat.

“O Holy Night,” sang Beau in a strong, enunciated tone,

“The stars are brightly shining:

It is the night of our dear Savior’s birth.

Long lay the world in sin and error pining,

‘Til he appeared and the soul felt its worth.”

“The thrill of hope,” Lucius interjected, and Beau immediately stopped.

“The Wizarding World rejoices,

For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.

Come, gather near – oh, hear the sirens’ voices!

O night divine,

O night...when faith is born...”

With a widening smile, Beau joined Lucius, and the two voices – one warm and robust and the other precise and smooth – harmonized beautifully as they sang the next words.

“O night divine,

O night...O night divine...”

The men exchanged a look, seeming just as surprised by their present predicament as the other. Then Beau beamed broadly, his cheeks and bulbous nose tinted with a happy flush.

“I forgive you, Lucius,” he said. “Though maybe next time someone does something nice for you, you could consider just taking it graciously?”

Lucius cocked his eyebrows sardonically. “Forgive me – I’m used to people being sharp enough to not give anything without expecting something in return.”

“Having no decency, then?” said Beau indignantly.

To everyone's amazement, Lucius actually laughed. It was quiet, almost understated, like an oddly full-bodied chuckle.

"I suppose so, yes."

Chapter End Notes

The book referred to in Ron's letter is the [*Malleus Maleficarum*](#), a text published in the 15th century that fueled anti-witch hysteria and served as a handbook for witch hunters for the next three hundred years.

One Door Closes, Another Opens

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

January 4, 1998

So everyone, guess what? I was right about Mr. Malfoy! He does like music! In fact, he likes it so much that he and Beau are actually talking about it! Nicely!

I can't believe how much things have changed since I first arrived. Mr. Malfoy still can be rotten most of the time and I still have to correct him about Noel's gender sometimes, but he seems much more relaxed than before. I think he's finally figured out that we're not out to get him – not that I could see how anyone might think people who are in hiding right along with you could be out to get you, but whatever!

Anyway, Mr. Malfoy's been playing the piano in the office a lot. Most of the time he prefers to be left alone, but at one point Trudy came in with a tray of sandwiches and he took a break to eat one. Mr. Malfoy said his mother used to love music too: she was an Abbott like you, Hannah! Though she had redder hair in her picture.

Love you all so much!

xoxoxo

Rose

Dear Rose,

How funny! All Pureblood families are interrelated, of course, but I guess I never made that connection between my family and the Malfoys, since Mum never put much stock in family trees and the like. I suppose Mum must've been Lucius's cousin several times removed, but of course they never acted like cousins, since Mum and her family weren't blood purists. Love of music is supposed to be an "Abbott family thing," though – that's what first brought Mum and Dad together! Red hair isn't usually, though: isn't that more a "Weasley thing," Ron? Haha!

Love,

Hannah

Dear Hannah,

*Oh, **absolutely**. I believe Malfoy on first meeting me recalled the recipe for a Weasley to be “red hair, hand-me-down robes, and more children than we can afford.” (I’m only kidding, don’t worry.)*

Gotta admit, Rose, it’s hard to imagine a Malfoy with red hair. I don’t know much about Lucius’s mum, but from what Dad’s said about Abraxas Malfoy, he was suspected of being involved with Nobby Leach’s early retirement. He was the first Muggle-born Minister of Magic, see, and he suddenly became very ill, and no one could figure out why. Most people knew Abraxas Malfoy hated Nobby Leach and had the means and motive to hurt him, but he just barely avoided being charged with anything, as Malfoys do.

Later,

Ron

To add on about Lucius’s parents –

Mother has mentioned in passing that Lucius’s name was actually somewhat controversial when he was born, since the relative he was named after, the first Lucius Malfoy, was rumored to have once courted a Muggle. The Malfoys have always denied this, and of course Lucius’s parents did the same, but apparently some letters Lucius’s mother wrote to her in-laws justifying her beliefs in blood supremacy were leaked to the public, causing her to withdraw completely and never leave Malfoy Manor again. Even now, very little is known about her or how she died, though of course rumors about her being murdered or committing suicide have been bounced around. Honestly, the Malfoy family seems like a drama I’d be loath to start examining too closely...

Love,

Daphne

January 5, 1998

Everyone,

Susan's gone underground too.

Ever since I went into the Room of Requirement, Alecto has been lashing out at random students, probably to flush out or stomp on any opposition. (She even targeted Blaise once, just for kicks – Susan said he looked kind of stunned that he was a subject of bullying, as it's usually the other way around.) Anyway, at one point Alecto asked Lavender Brown to write down notes on the board for her as she lectured and yanked her around by the hair really hard when Lavender couldn't keep up. Susan couldn't bear to see Lavender in such pain, so she went to Professor McGonagall after class for help. McGonagall couldn't do much, but she persuaded Madame Pomfrey to keep Lavender in the Hospital Wing for a few days so she could get some space from Alecto. Since Alecto couldn't go after McGonagall or Lavender, she went after Susan instead. She attacked Susan in the hallway outside Charms class, and Susan, acting in self-defense, summoned a Shield Charm. Alecto's curse bounced right off it, slashing open her face instead of Susan's. Alecto was so angry that she started blasting Cruciatus Curses all over the place, and Susan had to run upstairs as fast as she could to get away.

Fortunately Susan's now safe and sound in the Room of Requirement. It's been hard being all cooped up, but we've started hanging Hufflepuff banners in the room, so as to make the space a little cozier. As much as I hate our circumstances, it's been nice to have a friend close by besides Dobby. And of course, it's always nice to know I still have all of you.

I miss you all so much!

Love,

Hannah

Hannah,

Good to hear you and Susan are safe. I wish I could tell Professor McGonagall how bloody brilliant she is: I'm glad she was able to protect Lavender from that poxy twat Alecto!

This might sound weird, but...does anyone know anything about a device called a Deluminator? Dumbledore invented it, and from what I know, it's supposed to be one of a kind, but it's been acting sort of bonkers. It's supposed to just turn off lights, but...okay, this is going to sound really weird, but voices are coming out of it. Not just any voices either: Harry and Hermione's voices! They don't respond to anything I say, so I don't think the thing can be used to communicate or anything, but...yeah, it's weird.

Don't let the world get you down!

Ron

Dear Ron,

Since the Deluminator is a one of a kind object, I'm afraid there isn't much written about it, excluding the bare minimum description you used. I'd love to ask Mama about it, given her knowledge of Charm work, but I have a feeling she'd want a full explanation, and I don't like lying to her face. I've had to "lie by omission" about this scrapbook a lot already...

Papa's gone on a business trip for the Department of Mysteries. Of course he can't give us any details about his work, as always, but Mama and I will really miss him. Mama doesn't like changes in our routine (this whole year has been a nightmare for her), and having Papa not come home puts a damper on a lot of it.

Regards,

Arjuna

January 8, 1998

Hi everyone,

We finally finished taking down the last of our Christmas decorations today. The house looks a little gloomier without them, so Kevin surprised Dad, Dennis, and me with dinner when we got home! In order the dishes are a chicken and sweet potato shepherd's pie, a crunchy garden salad with mandarin oranges, and a batch of fresh cinnamon rolls! Kevin baked a lot of those, as he figured Dad and I could take the rest of rolls into work for our co-workers. They're really good: when Dad bit into his, I think he was close to tears of joy! I think I'll make a fresh round of glaze for the ones I bring into work, though: I reckon an apple and chestnut flavor would go well, what do you lot think?

Cheers!

Colin

Apple and chestnut would be lovely, Colin! I wish I could try your food too, Kevin: it really looks delicious.

Lalo asked to go on a date with me! I was super surprised, but honestly, I'm kind of excited! He said there's this really great movie called Titanic that's been at the top of the "box office" (which I guess is how Muggles measure the quality of movies?) for months now, and he'd really like to see it with me. It's supposed to be a romance – he blushed so sweetly when he admitted that, so I have to think it was on purpose. We're going out next Friday – wish me luck!

Love,

Cho

January 10, 1998

Anthony Goldstein has gone missing. Everyone's talking about it in the Great Hall, but no one seems to know where he's gone.

Hannah, is he with you?

MB

Millicent,

Yes! Anthony had been tagging the walls around the Headmaster's office with a large Order of the Phoenix icon when Amycus Carrow came along. Anthony escaped by blowing up the cans of spray paint with his wand and then running down the hall in the haze of color. He arrived in the Room of Requirement not long later. I'm really glad he's okay!

Love,

Hannah

Dear Hannah,

I thought that Anthony would appreciate knowing that Filch is having some trouble getting the enchanted spray paint off and Snape is furious. A few people have said it's Snape's birthday too – this wasn't exactly a present he wanted, I'm sure!

Love from

Astoria

January 12, 1998

Today the Daily Prophet published a new article about another new discovery supposedly made by the Department of Mysteries – a church in the Czech Republic (called the “Bone Church” – the name doesn't even sound real), made by Muggles, supposedly contains a shrine to a group that was a precursor to our modern Death Eaters. I'm taping the article in below – I just can't even begin to fathom it.

*First of all, this so-called “shrine” only encompasses a skull with a snake sliding through its eyes – that's not a shrine, it's an **art piece**! There are no offerings, no altar, no text explaining its purpose: nothing. Second, just because a symbol involves both a skull and a snake does not mean it's an early variant of the Dark Mark! Skulls are clearly symbolic of death, yes, but snakes have a variety of symbolic meanings: rebirth, healing, transformation, fertility, the list goes on. It could even be symbolic of the serpent from the Bible, which would go along with the art piece being in a Muggle church. Third, what about an ancient art piece resembling a Dark Mark proves that there was an early precursor to the Death Eaters? The Dark Lord created the Dark Mark symbol from scratch in the 1970s – perhaps he'd had influences elsewhere, but claiming he was taking the mantle of some ancient noble order defending the Wizarding World from the big, bad Muggles is as ridiculous as someone stealing a muffin and using it to open his own bakery!*

I just don't understand how anyone from the Department of Mysteries could've signed off on something like this. I know they didn't put out any of these wacky conclusions, but they have to know, after all the stuff they've already “discovered,” that any information they release is going to be twisted into whatever the Death Eaters need it to be!

I'm sorry to release all of this temper on you all. I hope you're all well.

Regards,

Arjuna

January 13, 1998

Arjuna,

I stopped by the Fountain House briefly, and while I was there, Ramsay mentioned that article. He says that Thicknesse has been using the discovery to try to overturn the Ministry's designation of the Death Eaters as a "threat to Ministry security," making it perfectly legal and lawful to be one! Of course we all know that the Ministry has been in You-Know-Who's pocket for months now, but with this new "discovery," current or ex-Death Eaters won't have to lie about their allegiances anymore – they'd be able to blare out their loyalties for the whole world to hear. And worse, considering that the Prophet's tried to slate the precursor to the Death Eaters as some noble, ancient order, the Death Eaters might try to wrap themselves up in that sort of rhetoric! It's disgusting!

I'll be moving on tonight, to keep looking for Harry and Hermione. I still hear their voices coming out of the Deluminator sometimes: if they are real, I guess at least they're still alive and safe...

Later,

Ron

Dear Arjuna,

I'm afraid the article has made quite a fuss here at Hogwarts too. Amycus and Alecko have run with it in their classes, making up tall tales about this "ancient Death's order" based on almost no evidence. The sad thing is that I've even heard a few younger students start repeating it back as if it's fact – as if the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters have been around forever, and that they'll always be there. It's enough to make anyone feel ill.

Love,

Daphne

Arjuna closed her scrapbook, trying to swallow back the nauseous, painful lump in the back of her throat as she headed downstairs. Dinner was always at six o'clock; if she were late, her mother would likely react very badly, and the very last thing Arjuna wanted to do was disrupt her routine any further.

Brushing her loose black braid over her shoulder, Arjuna left her room and descended the stairs into the kitchen.

Her mother, Chaaya Belaji, was already working on dinner. She had her hair tied back so tightly and neatly that every hair was pulled out of her face, and she was solely focused on what she was cooking, to the extent that she was absently mumbling to herself.

“Add a third teaspoon of chopped coriander – a fourth teaspoon of mint leaves – ”

“Hello, Mama,” Arjuna greeted.

“ – one eighth cup of fried onions with a teaspoon of ghee,” mumbled Chaaya without looking up.

Her mother’s lack of acknowledgement didn’t bother Arjuna. When Chaaya was focused on something, she very rarely put it down for anything, but she would still want to know that someone had entered the room, rather than be surprised by it.

Without another word, Arjuna came up beside Chaaya and washed her hands in the sink, drying it on the towel hung up under the kitchen window.

“ – Lastly, pour the saffron milk,” finished Chaaya distractedly.

Arjuna reached over and picked up the top of the pot Chaaya was using off the counter, holding it out for her to take.

“Here’s the lid, Mama,” she said patiently.

“Good,” said Chaaya.

Without looking up, the older witch took the lid and covered the pot. Then she took out her wand, conjured a cluster of bluebell flames underneath it, and turned to Arjuna.

“Your braid is loose,” she said levelly.

Arjuna smiled wryly. “I’m not as good at braiding hair as you are, Mama.”

“I know,” said Chaaya, though her voice was touched with humor too.

Arjuna walked over to the cupboard and started taking out plates and silverware so she and Chaaya could set the table.

“When’s Papa coming home?” asked Arjuna.

“He said he would try very hard to be here before 10 o’clock,” said Chaaya. “But he said that Ministry security has been tight on wizards entering or leaving the United Kingdom, so we shouldn’t be upset if he’s late.”

Arjuna nodded, glancing away uncomfortably. She knew she shouldn’t have expected he’d be home earlier, given how seriously he took his work, but the doubts and concerns swirling around in her brain made her wish he’d be home sooner rather than later.

The two Belaji women set the table for three and went about serving dinner. Chaaya kept one serving of her lamb biryani in the pot over the bluebell flames, while she and Arjuna started eating their portions. When they were finished, they cleaned up their plates, leaving the last setting alone on the table, and headed into the living room.

Because of how much smaller the Belajis’ safehouse was compared to their original home, the living room had become storage for Chaaya’s extensive library. Tall shelves full of hundreds of books dominated every wall, sometimes even encroaching on doorways, and hemmed in the small leather armchair and teal-cushioned couch in the center of the floor.

Arjuna fetched about ten books from the shelves and plopped the stack down on the couch between her and Chaaya. Over the course of the next two hours, they read side by side, commenting on their favorite passages amongst themselves.

“Mama,” said Arjuna, “when Horatio comments that he is *‘more of an antique Roman than a Dane,’* is he speaking about his code of honor? As if the Ancient Romans were more honorable than the Danish court?”

“He’s referring to Brutus and Cassius,” said Chaaya promptly without looking up from her own book. “They both committed suicide after killing Julius Caesar.”

Arjuna’s eyes lit up thoughtfully. “...Then Hamlet would be the Brutus to Horatio’s Cassius – proposing that they face the consequences of their actions together and die side by side, as comrades.”

“Yes. That’s why Hamlet tells Horatio to stay alive: *‘if thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, absent thee from felicity awhile and, in this harsh world, draw thy breath in pain to tell my story.’*”

True to her form, Chaaya quoted the passage from memory without any assistance. Arjuna nodded, smiling as she looked over the passage again.

‘I should use that phrase in our next pamphlet,’ she thought. *‘Drawing our breath in pain to tell the truth in the face of evil – that’s exactly what we’ve had to do, isn’t it?’*

Finally, when the clock struck 9, Arjuna put down *Hamlet* and headed off to bed. Rather than changing into her nightclothes, however, she stayed awake, waiting and listening. Once her parents had both gone to sleep, she could try to sneak out to meet up with the other Abraxans.

When 9:30 came and went, however, she did not hear the sound of her mother’s footsteps coming up the stairs, as they should have. Arjuna felt herself growing uneasy. Casually slipping out of bed, she cracked open her door, listening for some sound of movement.

“...as ever, *malikaa*.”

“Good.”

Startled, Arjuna glanced at the clock on her side table. 9:52 – he’d actually made it home on time for once?

“Was everything all right, while I was away?” asked Rohan Belaji. Unlike his wife’s consistently level tone, his voice sounded strained and guilty.

“Arjuna didn’t complain at all,” said Chaaya lightly.

“She never does,” said Rohan softly, and his voice betrayed some pride despite himself. He said something else, but he said it so quietly that Arjuna couldn’t hear him.

Being careful not to make any sound, Arjuna crept out of her room to the stairs. She slid to the floor and settled down on the top step, leaning on the banister so she could listen in on the conversation below.

“You wouldn’t be allowed to tell me the truth, if I asked you where you went,” Chaaya presumed bluntly.

Rohan hesitated. After a moment, he answered, “...No.”

Chaaya gave a disapproving sniff.

“*Malikaa*, I promised you long ago that I would never lie to you,” said Rohan solemnly, “but I cannot go back on my oath. I swore fealty to the Ministry of Magic.”

“You swore loyalty to the *Department of Mysteries*,” Chaaya corrected him.

“Which is part of the Ministry.”

“Which is supposed to *support and regulate* the Wizarding World!” Chaaya said impatiently.

“That’s what they were formed to do, isn’t it? ‘*Thus the chair argues that the Wizarding World requires, for ere more, a highly structured, organized, and complex structure of government, in order to effectively support and regulate this community in hiding!*’ That’s what the Wizard Council decided on May 29, 1707!”

“I know,” said Rohan tiredly.

There was a clinking of dishes. Chaaya had tossed some china haphazardly into the sink.

“I know you worked on that new *discovery* from the Czech Republic, though,” she said solemnly. “The one in the paper.”

Arjuna stiffened sharply. Rohan didn’t reply for a very long moment; when he did, it was very quiet and almost gloomy.

“You *know* that?”

“Yeah.”

The sound of rushing water and the scraping of dishes echoed in the stillness.

“I didn’t think the *Prophet* would run with it the way they did,” Rohan said lowly.

Arjuna’s black eyes widened in horror and dismay.

“All I’d thought they’d take from it is that Muggles are violent, that wizards are superior – the usual stuff they make up and we all know isn’t true,” Rohan continued sullenly. “But they saw that *one* skull with the sculpture of a snake in it, and just immediately jumped to the conclusion that it was a *Death Eater* symbol – ”

“People jump to stupid conclusions,” Chaaya cut him off bluntly. “They always do.”

“I *know* that!” said Rohan desperately. “I just – I didn’t know it would...*blow up* like this. All I wanted to do was create some kind of distraction – *anything* to get Thicknesse’s and Dolohov’s attention off of...everything else...”

“And what *is* that ‘*everything else*?’”

Both Rohan and Chaaya looked up, shocked, as Arjuna strode down the stairs and into the room. Her black eyes were narrowed upon Rohan and flaring with righteous anger.

“What exactly were you trying to *prevent*, Papa? The assassination of Ministry employees? The internment and persecution of Muggle-borns? The separation of families? The Ministry’s propaganda efforts? The *Daily Prophet*’s flood of misinformation championing the righteousness of the Wizarding World at the Muggle World’s expense?!”

Rohan seemed to quake. His eyes, identical in color to Arjuna’s, rippled in anguish.

“Arjuna, *gehna*, listen...there’s so much about this that you don’t understand – ”

“You’re right!” snapped Arjuna. “I don’t! I don’t understand how you could for a *second* justify kowtowing to the Death Eaters at the Ministry by fueling the fires of blood supremacist propaganda!”

Chaaya flinched in response to Arjuna’s rising volume, subconsciously retreating into the corner of the room and placing a hand over her ear. Her retreat seemed to make Rohan look more fragile, as it left him alone in the face of Arjuna’s fury.

“*Gehna*, no one person could take down the evils that plague our institution,” he said desperately. “I know it doesn’t seem like much, but what I’m doing *is* helping, even just in small ways, I promise you – ”

“*THAT’S NOT ENOUGH!*”

Arjuna strode forward, sticking her finger in Rohan’s face.

“YOU’RE PART OF THE MINISTRY! YOU HAVE A POSITION OF POWER! SURE, IT’S NOT MUCH, BUT YOU HAVE AUTHORITY – THE AUTHORITY NEEDED FOR PEOPLE TO *LISTEN* TO YOU, IF YOU WERE TO SPEAK OUT! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH YOU COULD DO WITH THAT – HOW MUCH *I* COULD DO, IF I HAD THAT?! I’M JUST A *KID*! AND YET I’VE DONE MORE TO FIGHT THE DARK LORD THAN YOU’VE EVEN *TRIED* TO – !”

Rohan’s pained, ashamed eyes suddenly hardened.

“You’ve done *what*?!”

Arjuna realized too late what she'd let slip. Trying desperately to back-pedal, she fumbled over her words.

"I mean – I've –"

Rohan's eyes shot to his belongings on the table, running over them carefully.

"...*That's* why my Invisibility Cloak has so much more wear than before," he said accusingly, his gaze darting back to his daughter's face. "You've been sneaking out of the house, haven't you?"

Arjuna opened her mouth, ready to protest, but Rohan fixed her with a very sharp look. She slowly closed her mouth and looked down at the floor sullenly.

"...Yes, Papa."

Chaaya slowly raised her head, looking from Rohan and Arjuna. Despite the discomfort in her body language, she moved to Rohan's side and rested a hand on his arm.

"She didn't mean to," she said at once, though it was clearly a guess on her part.

"No, she *absolutely* meant to," murmured Rohan coldly.

His black eyes were flaring just as angrily as Arjuna's had minutes previously as he considered her.

"Am I to presume that after I went to sleep, you would steal my Cloak and sneak out of the house, to meet up with members of the Resistance against the Ministry?"

Arjuna glared at the floor just ahead of Rohan's feet.

"Yes."

“And am I *also* to presume,” said Rohan, his voice hushing to a sharp whisper, “that the person trying to break into my files at the house was not, as I suspected, someone from the Ministry tailing me, but was in truth *you* as well?”

Arjuna raised her head, meeting his fiery gaze head-on.

The young Abraxan had tried for *months* to get into her father’s black cabinet, in an attempt to locate those Muggle-born files Antonin Dolohov had entrusted to the Department of Mysteries. The memory of the four gold, password-encoded locks rippled over her mind. Each lock had been engraved with the characters for the four Purusarthas: Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksa. Arjuna had worked out that each lock had a password that had to do with each concept and had figured out the first (M-I-N-I-S-T-R-Y), third (C-H-A-A-Y-A), and fourth (B-R-A-H-M-A-N), but no matter what she’d tried, the second password had eluded her, and so the cabinet had remained completely sealed.

Rohan’s eyes narrowed. After a moment, he plowed across the room, snatching his Invisibility Cloak and house keys from the table, and headed to the front door.

“You will not meet with those people again,” he said very coldly.

Arjuna whirled around, staring at Rohan’s back in dismay.

“Papa, the Abraxans are fighting the Dark Lord!” she cried angrily. “We *all* are!”

“You are *underage*, Arjuna!” bellowed Rohan. “Their *fight*’ has coaxed you into the open, where you’re unable to use any magic without setting off the Trace and alerting the entire Wizarding World of your existence! And may I point out that the only reason your mother has not been hauled before the Ministry and you haven’t been forced to live under Severus Snape’s rule is that she’s supposedly ill and you are *tending* to her!”

Arjuna flinched. She would never have feared going back to Hogwarts – after all, Daphne, Millicent, and Astoria had had to brave the Carrows’ reign of terror, and she figured she could also. But she hadn’t considered how much her getting caught could put her mother in danger. Plenty of people had theorized that Chaaya was a Squib or close to it, given her lack of magical talent beyond Charms, which would make her an easy target for the Death Eaters.

“The Abraxans’ pamphlets are indeed a thorn in the Minister’s side,” said Rohan, “and many just-minded people at the Ministry find comfort in them. But there are more than enough full-grown witches and wizards who can take on this struggle in your place – ones better equipped to face it than you. I assure you, Thicknesse and his supporters are just as small-minded as they appear – they won’t last long, and their poisonous influence at the Ministry will be flushed out soon enough. Until then, the moral among us can at least circumvent the worst of it.”

“But Papa – ” started Arjuna, but he cut her off.

“You were meeting one of your friends tonight, I daresay?”

Arjuna stared at her father’s back for a long moment, too frustrated to answer. Rohan took her silence as confirmation.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to report them to the Ministry.”

Her eyes widening in horror, Arjuna charged toward Rohan, but Chaaya seized hold of her, squeezing her close to her chest so she couldn’t move any closer. Rohan turned to look at Arjuna, his face as haunted as some morose skull’s.

“I’m sorry, *gehna* – my oath demands that I report all suspicious activity. I’ll make sure they get away and I’ll claim ignorance to their identity so they can continue their work in peace...but at least that should tell them not to return to this location in the future.”

Arjuna squirmed desperately, but Chaaya held on tightly.

“If you don’t want them around, just *tell* them so,” said Chaaya, her voice rippling with upset. “You know I hate it when you’re vague.”

“I can’t consort with traitors, no matter how sympathetic they may be,” said Rohan sharply. “I *must* stay loyal to the Ministry, even if I have no such loyalty for its leadership.”

“I also hate it when you put the Ministry up on such a stupid high pedestal,” Chaaya added insistently. “It’s only made up of *people*, you know.”

Rohan faced his front door, his black eyes full of shame that he tried desperately to keep in. Without another word, he opened the door, swept on his Invisibility Cloak, and disappeared into the night, snapping the door closed behind him.

Arjuna finally pulled free of Chaaya's grip and ran over to the door, but it was sealed shut. She took out her wand and tried to blast it open.

"Alohomora! Reducto! Bombarda!"

But each spell just ricocheted uselessly off the enchanted doorknob.

"Arjuna..."

Chaaya didn't seem to know what she wanted to say, but felt like she should say something. Finally she reached out and grabbed hold of Arjuna's wrist, pulling it down and away from the door.

"There's no point," she said quietly.

Her eyes welling up with angry tears, Arjuna turned on her heel and barreled right past her mother. She ran up the stairs two at a time, and once she reached her room, she slammed the door shut behind her so violently that it made the floor shake.

Meanwhile, in a run-down old pub in Enfield, Ron was fiddling with the lighter-like device that Dumbledore had bequeathed him. He turned it over in his hand, eying his distorted reflection in its silvery cap.

There *had* to be a reason, the youngest Weasley boy thought to himself. At first he'd thought he'd dreamt of hearing Hermione's voice while he was playing with it, but it soon became obvious.

For whatever reason, the Deluminator, which was supposed to just capture and restore light from lamps and such, also seemed to tap into the locations the light inside of it had originated from, prompting Hermione and Harry's voices to echo from it. Ron didn't entirely get it, but he had played with the Deluminator a lot in his, Harry's, and Hermione's tent way back when...so

perhaps, he considered, he could now catch snippets of their conversations thanks to the light he'd captured from their location. He could never make out much of what they were saying, but his name did crop up quite a bit. Hermione's voice in particular murmured his name a lot...

'Fat lot of good that does, though,' he thought glumly. 'It's not like I can answer back. It's not like I can ask where they are, or beg their forgiveness...'

"Oh, Ron..."

Ron stiffened visibly. The voice was emanating from the Deluminator, choked with tears.

'Hermione?'

Glancing around at the mostly abandoned room, Ron quickly grabbed his rucksack and left the pub, being careful to dodge the drunken man sloshing a full beer down his front as he tried and failed to charm a trio of girls at the bar.

The snow had stopped falling outside, but it was no less cold as Ron strolled down the abandoned street and back into the woods. The memory of Hermione conjuring up a cluster of pretty bluebell flames in a jar that he, she, and Harry could carry around for warmth rippled through his mind, and he shivered again. What he wouldn't *give* to hear her voice again, even if it was just her being mad at him –

He slipped the Deluminator out of his pocket.

"Ron, Ron..."

The voice quickly dissolved into mumbles so incoherent Ron couldn't make them out – almost like its owner was crying.

Barely thinking, Ron clicked the Deluminator. Maybe if he could release the light with Hermione's voice in it from inside, it'd somehow become easier to hear –

On cue a ball of light popped out of the Deluminator, hovering before Ron. To his surprise,

however, this light was not its usual light yellow, but a bright, bluish-white.

“Wha...?”

Ron’s eyes narrowed confusedly upon the ball of light. He raised a hand as if to touch it, but held back before his fingers could make contact.

The bluish ball rotated on its axis for a moment, humming quietly. Then, very slowly, it floated forward, colliding with Ron’s chest and fading away into his skin.

Ron suddenly felt like he was enveloped in a wonderful, warm blanket. He glanced down at his chest and hands, which were aglow in bluish white light.

“Ron...”

The voice was in his head now, echoing in his ears like a heavenly choir.

And all at once, Ron understood.

Closing his eyes with a smile, he Disapparated, not even attempting to visualize his destination. He didn’t know it – yet he thought he already did.

Chapter End Notes

The "Bone Church" mentioned in this chapter is also called the Cemetery Church of All-Saints, [a real church in the Czech Republic](#). And yes, there is a skull with a roughly carved and painted snake coming out of it.

Arjuna's Prediction

January 16, 1998

GUYS, I DID IT! I FOUND HARRY AND HERMIONE!

Okay, so I was sitting in this old pub when the Deluminator started acting up again. I went outside and I clicked it to try to get the light with Hermione's voice out of it. When I did, this ball of blue light appeared and went right into my chest, and I don't know how, but I just knew it would take me where I needed to go, so I Disapparated. I appeared in the middle of these woods I didn't know, so I camped out for a few days, waiting and hoping that Harry or Hermione might show themselves...and yeah, eventually Harry did! Harry's forgiven me for leaving, but Hermione's still a little cross with me. I don't blame her, really: I haven't forgiven myself yet either, but it still feels so, so good to be back with them and to know they're both safe...

Hope you all are well,

Ron

Oh Ron, that's wonderful news!! I'm so, so glad that everything worked out – not knowing if Harry and Hermione were okay was hard for me, but it had to have been so much harder for you. I'm really happy that you're together again. I'm sure Hermione will forgive you soon enough: I think she's just trying not to show how happy she is that you came back.

I have good news too. When Dobby visited the Room of Requirement today, he told us that he'd received an unsigned note suggesting that he take a look around Hogsmeade. Dobby had been a little nervous that it might be a trap, but he figured he should take a look anyway, in case it was a member of the D.A. who'd sent it. It hadn't been from the D.A., but it's a good thing he did anyway, because he found Seamus Finnigan hiding under the porch in front of what used to be Madame Puddifoot's! He'd gotten separated from his parents in the Highlands and ended up getting chased by some Snatchers, but he was just barely able to escape. He'd been hiding out under that porch for almost three days by the time we found him.

Dobby immediately Apparated Seamus to the castle and brought him to the Room of Requirement. Anthony, Susan, and I were really happy to see him, and Neville and the rest of the D.A. were too – I've been trying to feed Seamus a lot, to help bring the life back into his cheeks.

I love you all! Stay safe!

Love,

Hannah

Dear Ron,

It's so great that you found them! The odds were so against you, but I'm so glad that you didn't give up and that everything turned out for the best.

Whoever tipped off Dobby has my gratitude, Hannah. Who knows what might have happened to Seamus, if someone hadn't come to help him...

*I just got back home after seeing Titanic with Lalo, and...**WOW!** I've never seen anything more remarkable in my life! We studied movies briefly in Muggle Studies (for those who didn't, they're basically like our magical photographs, except with spoken dialogue and scripting like a play), but our class did not do them justice! I know the ship sinking was just a trick, but it looked so real, and I just got so wrapped up in the story! The love story was so beautiful: both Lalo and I were crying by the end. I'm really looking forward to going out to the movies with Lalo again sometime: he's really fascinated by how movies work, and it was a lot of fun hearing him talk about the musical score and the "Foley work" (which is what they call sounds added to the movie while the crew is editing the film, rather than when the moving pictures are actually taken). Lalo made it really easy to understand, even though I don't know a lot about making movies.*

I miss you all – wish you were here!

Love,

Cho

January 19, 1998

Hannah,

So good to hear about Seamus! Harry and Hermione were really relieved too. Hope his mum and dad are okay...

Ron

January 24, 1998

Kevin just finished his January cake: a Hufflepuff badger! Doesn't it look great? It's a lemon pound cake with black-dyed cream cheese filling, vanilla frosting, and black licorice details. I particularly love the Hufflepuff scarf rolled out of fondant – I helped him a little with that part, as he's still getting used to his new hand.

The cake's also delicious as always. I've convinced Kevin to make a Gryffindor lion next, though, and I reckon that'll be even better!

Cheers!

Colin

I dOn't think I agreed to that.

Kevin

January 28, 1998

Brrr, is it cold here in New York! Our heating unit is broken, so our superintendent has put in an order to get it fixed, but in the meantime, Mum, Dad, and I have had to make do with simple bluebell fires. We can't afford to do much else, as we don't want to alarm the Muggles. It reminds me all the more how very lucky we are to have magic – I think that's why Dad and his friends believe so strongly that the Wizarding and Muggle worlds should come together and help each other with their respective problems...

Lalo invited me out to the movies for Valentine's Day. This time we'll be seeing a comedy called The Wedding Singer, and afterwards Lalo said we could go shopping in Times Square, if I'm up to it. I told him I'm already up for it! Amanda has been teasing me about Lalo, saying that he's been acting like a little puppy around me, which I don't think is true at all! When I said so, however, Amanda only laughed louder, so I let it go.

Hope you're all well!

Love,

Cho

February 7, 1998

The Abraxans' newest pamphlet has just arrived at school. I'm taping it in below, but as you can see, R.J. Moon is not cited as the author. Instead someone called "Caeneus Jove" wrote it. They're not nearly as good, but I like that they cited some quotes of Moon's – whoever they are, they clearly really respect R.J. Moon.

Arjuna, we haven't heard from you in a few days – is everything all right? Please write and let us know.

Love from

Daphne

Daphne,

That's Julien! Marietta told me that he showed her a letter he was sending to the Daily Prophet last year, and I think that was the penname he signed it with (I remember because I had to look up what Greek myth "Caeneus" was from). I'm so happy that he's helping the Abraxans out!

Love,

Cho

Daphne,

I'm all right: I just haven't been in the mood to write much lately...

A few weeks ago I overheard Papa talking to Mama about work, and he pretty much admitted that he'd worked on some of those archeological projects that are now being blown out of proportion by Thicknesse and his cronies. When I heard it, I couldn't help it – I blew up at him. I've never yelled at Papa like that before. The whole thing was just terrible, all the way around. I haven't talked to him at all since then, and I just don't know what to say at all. I hate him for what he's done, and yet he's still my loving, wonderful Papa, and I know he's just afraid for us, but I also know he's wrong and his lack of action is endangering everyone more than it could possibly help. I feel so torn.

I hope you all are well.

Regards,

Arjuna

February 8, 1998

Oh, R.J., I can't imagine how terrible you must feel. I can't believe your father would do something like that! He's always loved his job so much, loved history so much – to have his work twisted the way it's been must not be easy for him. I guess he'd have to be doing it to protect you and your mother, but even so, I'm really sad that he's just given up like that.

I wish that I could be there with you, or that I could at least send Wagtail your way. Wagtail seems to have guessed that I've been down in the dumps; he's taken to landing on my shoulder at mealtimes and staying with me until I drop him off at the Owlery myself. It's almost made me late for class a few times, but I honestly don't mind at all – Wagtail usually takes the opportunity to squawk and ruffle his feathers like some flashy peacock, which always makes me laugh.

I miss you so much!

Love from

Astoria

February 14, 1998

Happy 16th birthday, Stori! Given that I'm on "house arrest," I can't give you a proper present, but I guess I can at least give you this quote from The Merchant of Venice that has always

reminded me of you:

*“The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentler rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.”*

I hope your birthday is wonderful, and I hope that you'll imagine me there with you, singing my wishes to you louder and more off-key than everyone else!

Love,

Arjuna

Happy birthday, Astoria! COlin and I went tO the local shopping center aNd I picked these earrings out for you: I thought they'd bring oUt the color of your eyes.

MiSs you so much!

KeVin

P.S. from Colin:

I'm also enclosing these nifty glasses for you, which are supposed to protect your eyes if you look up at a solar eclipse! There's one coming up on the 26th, and I thought it might be super cool to take a peek at it up on the Astronomy Tower!

Happy 16th, Astoria.

MB

Happy sweet 16, Astoria! I hope you have a good time celebrating it. I wish I could help with your birthday cake – maybe next year I can try to make a modernized fruit cake for you?

Love,

Hannah

Happy birthday, Astoria! Guess I owe you a cake too – how does an apple cheddar pie sound, in place of a cake?

Later,

Ron

February 15, 1998

Thank you for all of the birthday wishes, everyone! Daphne, Millicent, and I decided to skip a full cake and just made some bacon scones with a maple glaze; then we put a candle in mine and I blew it out so I could make my wish. I know I can't say what it was, but I think all of you probably can guess it all the same.

Hannah and Ron, both ideas sound delicious: I can't wait to try them! And R.J., thank you for the quote. It really is lovely.

I love you all so much!

Astoria

February 18, 1998

Harry, Hermione, and I went to visit Mr. Lovegood, and while we were there, we learned what happened to Luna.

During the winter holidays, an Auror and a pair of MASTIF agents appeared on the Lovegoods' doorstep. The Mastiffs demanded an audience with Mr. Lovegood, supposedly to discuss the "deceptive" articles he'd been publishing in the Quibbler and rumors that had linked him to the Abraxan movement. Fortunately those rumors didn't hold any water and Lovegood didn't know anything about the Abraxans, but while the agents were interrogating him, the Auror took Luna into custody! By the time Lovegood caught wise, Luna was already in restraints and being led away. He tried to go after them, but the Mastiffs stopped him, saying that Luna wouldn't be harmed, but from the sound of things, the Ministry has since threatened Lovegood to keep him in line. The shifty old loon even sent an owl to the Ministry when we arrived so they could capture us! Hermione reckons he did it to try and get Luna back, but I don't care – Luna would hate knowing her dad could be such a coward!

I know the MASTIF agents claimed Luna would be all right, but that kind of claim just doesn't hold much weight, all things considered. I really hope she is, though...

Later,

Ron

Oh, poor Luna! I'm very glad that you, Harry, and Hermione were able to get away, but I still feel so badly for Mr. Lovegood! What he did was wrong, no question, but it must have been so hard, having your only child arrested!

Neville is glad for the news of Luna, even if it isn't good. He told me to tell you to write if you hear anything else.

Love,

Hannah

Okay, so Kevin decided to keep his February cake a secret these last few weeks and wouldn't let either Dennis or me see it. I assumed it meant he really did go along with me and make me my Gryffindor cake – but, it turns out, he duped me. Here's the cake he made.

*I mean, **really**, Kevin? Did you have to have the lion drooling in its sleep? You couldn't even give my house a shred of dignity?*

Colin

*Hahaha! All **you** said was to **make** a Gryffindor liOn cake. You **ne**Ver said what you wanted it tO look like!*

K evin

Snow was falling. The snowflakes trailed through the air in artistic spirals, catching in Arjuna's eyelashes as she blinked through the flurry. Everything was slightly blurred like a fogged-up window. She could barely see a thing...yet she felt she'd been here before...

Suddenly, all at once, the sky turned pitch black.

Arjuna looked up. The sun had been completely blocked out in a solar eclipse, suffocating the light before it could reach the Earth below. All she could see were the quickening snowfall and the whitish fog of her own breath –

Then, all of sudden, in the distance, there was a flicker of movement. There was a large crowd of men, but they were such shadows in the dark that she couldn't make out any faces. Only one shape was clear enough to be seen – it was a round, regal-looking woman, shining almost pure white in the falling snow –

*Then something fell into the snow – or rather, three things. Three wands, no doubt thrust from their owners' hands, landed with a soft **thud** on the ground.*

Arjuna couldn't explain the rush of fear racing through her as she ran closer. Somehow, deep inside of her, she knew – those wands needed to be in their owners' hands – if they weren't, those men were defenseless – yet no matter how fast she ran, she somehow could get no closer – !

Her heartbeat pounded in her ears harder and harder as she ran more and more desperately – she couldn't breathe – she felt like she was going blind – light was encasing her, scarlet and purple and bright, killing green –

Arjuna woke up in a horrible, cold sweat. She was frozen for a moment in bed, unable to breathe or move. Then, finally, she gave a loud gasp and clutched her chest, forcing herself to sit up. All at once, she was overcome with oxygen deprivation and nausea, and she quickly rolled over and threw up into the trashcan next to her bed.

Her stomach and head both throbbed in pain as she straightened up, trying to get a hold of herself. She coughed, her black eyes running hesitantly over the walls of her room; then she leaned toward her bedside table, snatched two tissues from the box on top of it, and cleaned the residue off her chin with a trembling hand.

That dream...it wasn't just a dream, she thought immediately. She'd had plenty of nightmares in her life, but only one other had ever felt *that* horrible. Only that one made her feel so ill – had terrified her so thoroughly –

The images of a tower struck by lightning and Dumbledore's open casket rippled over Arjuna's mind. Did that mean...that someone *else* was going to die? That there was going to be some other unthinkable, horrific murder?

Arjuna felt as though a Burmese python had found its way into her chest and was now squeezing her heart in its coils.

Panting softly, the youngest Abraxan slowly brought her arms around her knees, trying to recall every detail she could of the dream trying to disappear into the crevices of her mind.

'Snow – a solar eclipse – a woman in white – three wands, falling into the snow – '

Arjuna resisted the urge to vomit again by burying her face into her elbow, breathing in and out through her nose heavily.

'Get a grip,' she told herself, *'get a grip now – you've got to...figure out what it means – '*

Her first instinct was to refer to the dream symbolism she'd learned while studying with Professor Trelawney.

'Snow can mean childhood, or the past,' thought Arjuna. *'Eclipses mean change or evolution – the sun can symbolize masculinity, aggression, and power...wands of course symbolize magic...and a woman...well, it's generally a positive omen, but in this case, it most certainly can't be – '*

She frowned uncomfortably. None of these interpretations seemed to make that much sense: after all, if it truly was about a sharp shift away from past behavior that would bring about good fortune, then there was no reason she should've felt as ill as she did.

Wiping some of the sweat from her face, Arjuna looked down at her sheets, her mind racing faster than ever.

'What if I thought about it more literally?' she thought slowly. *'I had a vision of a lightning-struck tower, back in June – yes, it meant doom, which was true...but Professor Dumbledore also died at the Astronomy Tower during a thunderstorm. So...'*

She closed her eyes.

'If it was snowing...well, the event would have to be happening in the winter, which it is now. A solar eclipse...'

The image stirred something in her memory. *Colin* had mentioned an eclipse happening soon, when he'd taped those weird glasses into the scrapbooks for Astoria –

'Thursday,' Arjuna recalled. *'Thursday the 26th – that's in three days!'*

The image of the womanly figure ran through her mind again.

'I've seen that woman somewhere before,' she thought crossly. 'That round, tall frame – sitting up on some sort of high pedestal, made of brick –'

Her eyes widened.

*'Brick – Royal Holloway! The campus where Roger's safe house is hidden! There was a statue of a queenly woman on that campus! **That** was the figure!'*

Arjuna was shaking. Even if she felt a little excitement that things were starting to add up, it was dampened by how much each new thought filled her with more nausea and dread. She clenched the sides of her star-printed pajama pants, her fists turning white with the tenseness of their grip.

'Three wands falling to the ground,' she thought at last. 'Their owners had to have been disarmed – it's the only explanation. Without a wand, a witch or wizard is defenseless – helpless. That means...that means three people are in danger. The wands represent their owners – three wands fell, so that means –'

Her heart stopped as she realized what it had to mean – why that image terrified and sickened her so thoroughly –

'...Three people will die.'

And it was obvious who those three men had to be.

Roger lived next to that campus.

Eddie was Roger's Secret Keeper.

Julien was the new author of the Abraxans' pamphlets.

February 23, 1998

Everyone,

I need help. Unfortunately I can't go into too many details right now, but I hope that you'll trust me in this all the same, for I assure you, it's very important.

Recently Papa (who is Mama's and my Secret Keeper) has tightened the security of the enchantment around our house, making it so Mama and I are unable to leave without him also being present. Although I know it's for our safety, I must get out of the house before the 26th, but that would require breaking the enchantment over the house, which would leave Mama vulnerable. What can you guys tell me about the Secret Keeper enchantment? I would under any other circumstances ask Mama, but I can't risk her catching on to what I'm trying to do...

Write back soon,

Arjuna

Dear Arjuna,

I unfortunately don't know much about Secret Keepers, except that they are entrusted with a secret only the Keeper and the people they're protecting know, but...I just had to say this.

I really, really don't like the idea of you leaving your house when it's so dangerous. Your parents would no doubt be worried sick if they knew what you were thinking, and that's not fair to them. Still...I have a feeling you've been doing a lot of important things without taking any credit for a long time, and I'm pretty sure that what you're doing now is just as important as those other things have been. If I'm right, then I know you're doing what you have to, and I hope you know we believe in you. Please be safe.

Hannah

Arjuna,

SeConding Hannah. It may be dangerOus, but we know you woulDn't face that danger if it weren't important, and we know yoU can handle it. People liKe you are rare, but I know that they coUld take flight, if they so chose.

Kevin

Dear Arjuna,

I'm passing the scrapbook to Hermione, who's read up on the Secret Keeper enchantment...and I hope you know that we're all behind you, and the Abraxans, too.

Hang in there!

Ron

Dear Arjuna,

The most important thing about a Secret Keeper is that it's symbolic of ultimate trust. In order to make someone a Secret Keeper, at least two wands (one for the Keeper and one for their dependant, with one additional wand for every other person being protected) must be touching, while the Keeper and the protected party or parties say their "Secret" in unison. Then the Keeper recites the oath:

"I make this vow right here and now –

Burden me with your fate, and I'll be your sentry.

You may sleep well; I shall keep well

Your Secret and thus deny all evils entry."

Then the Secret Keeper must cast the incantation outside the location to finish hiding the house, with a circular wand movement that starts and ends at the top of the location, in this case the roof: " Protegas Meomnes!"

Interestingly, if the Secret Keeper is a Muggle, a Squib, or just not that magically powerful, then the person being protected can also cast the spell in their stead from inside the house with a different incantation.

There can only be one Secret Keeper on one property at a time – any additional attempts would merely cancel out the first. Anyone who knows the Secret is allowed entry into the location, but the more people know the Secret, the less effective the spell is, so it's wise to keep the Secret among as few people as possible. The Secret Keeper can never call the location they're protecting "home," although visitation is permitted without damaging the spell's protection.

I hope this helps!

Love from

Hermione

February 24, 1998

Everyone,

Thank you for the help. I'm truly grateful, but...

Stori, you knew, but I know you wouldn't have told anyone. You couldn't have, without me also seeing it in the scrapbook. So, the rest of you...

Did you always know? If so, why didn't you ask, to be sure? Why didn't you get angry with me, for not telling you?

Arjuna

Arjuna,

We didn't always know – or, at least, Kevin and I didn't always know. But I just...I don't know, it kind of became obvious, after a while. The timing of when pamphlets were written – the quotes that were used – Astoria calling you “R.J.” – you not writing to us at the exact same time that R.J. didn't write a pamphlet – even just your writing style in the scrapbooks – I don't know, after a bit, we both decided that it probably had to be you.

And you know something? I'm really proud of you, Arjuna. It must've been hard holding that burden on your shoulders by yourself, and although, yeah, I wish you'd told us, it also just seems like you to not tell us. I bet you had your own reasons for not sharing what you were doing, and even if I might not agree with them exactly, I know those reasons were noble. No matter what else, you're still our friend.

Cheers!

Colin

Dear Arjuna,

I didn't know either, but...oh, I'm so glad you are!

Colin's so right. We're all really proud of you, Arjuna!

xoxoxo,

Rose

Arjuna,

You being R.J. Moon is hands-down the single best surprise I could've thought up. I'm so glad that you were able to find a way to help even though you were in hiding, and that you were able to help so much! It was always so wonderful hearing R.J. Moon's letters on the radio, and now I know why – it was because I was listening to your words being read aloud, for the whole Wizarding World to hear! You should be so proud of yourself, Arjuna.

Love,

Cho

I didn't know, but I had a suspicion. If nothing else, Astoria would always perk up whenever anything about R.J. Moon came up on Potterwatch.

I understand keeping secrets, Arjuna, but I wish you wouldn't have. Regardless, it is true to your nature, so I guess I can't be surprised. Just don't do it again.

Whatever your mission is, please be safe in completing it.

Love from

Daphne

I only suspected it too.

MB

Hell no, I didn't know! I was way off at the start, honestly: Harry, Hermione, and I thought it was Professor Lupin writing all those letters. But yeah, as Colin said, after a while, things just started to add up.

I know why you had to keep your secret, Arjuna – I mean, I've kept what Harry, Hermione, and I have been doing secret from you guys too, and it's not because I don't trust you, but because it's just that important to keep secret. There's no way I could be mad about you doing the same.

Go get 'em, R.J.! You've got this!

Ron

February 25, 1998

Thank you, all of you. You all are the truest of friends, and I feel so beyond blessed to count you as mine.

Love,

Arjuna

Arjuna brought both of her hands up to her face, wiping the tears that had streaked down her cheeks. She couldn't do anything about the ones that had landed on the page, unfortunately, but at least her words were still readable.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her dark blue scrapbook, tucked it under her pillow, and headed downstairs.

Her father Rohan would be home a little earlier than usual that night, so this was her only chance. Not only were Eddie, Roger, and Julien in danger, but if they were tortured, the Ministry might learn about Arjuna's involvement, which would put her parents in danger too. She had to get her father's files to Potterwatch before the Ministry confiscated them and warn the Abraxans before the solar eclipse, no matter what.

Arjuna knew what she had to do – she just prayed she'd have the courage needed to do it.

Chaaya was already making dinner when Arjuna came downstairs. Arjuna helped her mother finish up her duck and vegetable curry; then the two served it onto three dishes and began to eat, leaving the last dish for Rohan. Once they'd cleaned up as usual, they headed into the library and sat down on the couch to read.

Just before 9:00, the front door opened and Rohan entered the room. His face was paler and more haunted than ever, and he looked upon his wife and daughter with hesitation.

“...I'm home,” he said weakly.

Arjuna had not acknowledged her father at all in the last month, but this night she got to her feet and greeted him with a large hug. Rohan straightened up sharply.

“Hi, Papa,” she mumbled into his shoulder.

Rohan looked down at his daughter, stunned and disbelieving. Then, his eyes filling to the brim with relief and pain, he brought his arm around her, burying his hand into her hair and holding her close.

The Belaji family spent the rest of the night reading together. At some points they were even able to smile and laugh. At one point Arjuna read one of Rohan’s favorite lines from Don Quixote aloud and Rohan chuckled loudly, before proceeding to recite the scene again with a more dramatic presentation to make his wife and daughter laugh.

“Mama,” said Arjuna, her black eyes drifting over to Chaaya, “can you recite Papa’s and your monologue? The one from *Love’s Labor’s Lost*?”

Chaaya and Rohan shared a smile.

“*“A time, methinks, too short,”*” she recited coolly,

“*“To make a world-without-end bargain in -*

No, no, my lord, your grace is perjured much,

Full of dear guiltiness; and therefore this:

If for my love, as there is no such cause,

You will do aught, this shall you do for me:

Your oath I will not trust; but go with speed

To some forlorn and naked hermitage,

Remote from all the pleasures of the world.””

“*“There stay until the twelve celestial signs,”*” Rohan joined her with a widening smile,

“Have brought about the annual reckoning.

If this austere, insociable life

Change not your offer made in the heat of blood;

If frosts and fasts, hard lodging and thin weeds

Nip not the gaudy blossoms of your love,

But that it bear this trial and last love;

That, at the expiration of the year,

Come challenge me, challenge me by these deserts,

And, by this virgin palm now kissing thine,

I will be thine; and ‘til that instant shut my woeful self up in a mourning house,

Raining the tears of lamentation

For the remembrance of my father’s death.””

“If this thou do deny, let our hands part,” Arjuna joined them in a soft whisper,

“Neither entitled in the other’s heart.””

As soon as the three finished the last lines, a glow of violet and gold magic erupted from behind Arjuna’s back. Rohan and Chaaya both shot to their feet, staring in shock, as the magic shot across the room, jumping into the walls and making the floors quake.

Arjuna got to her feet, holding her, her mother’s, and her father’s wands in one hand.

“I make this vow – right here and now – ”

Rohan’s head shot up sharply at the sound of the familiar words. He turned to his daughter, speechless in horror.

“Arjuna – !”

He darted forward, trying to grab her, but Arjuna dashed across the room and into the hall.

“Burden me with your fate and I’ll be your sentry!”

Chaaya, understanding what was going on too, had started shaking. She stumbled forward, running after her daughter with her hand outstretched.

“Wait – wait – ”

“You may sleep well – ” Arjuna said as quickly as she could while still speaking clearly, *“I shall keep well – ”*

“Arjuna, *STOP!*” cried Rohan.

He leapt over the armchair, dashing out of the sitting room and down the hall after his daughter as fast as he could.

Despite her parents’ efforts, however, Arjuna reached the front door, now devoid of her father’s protection, and yanked it open.

“ – *your Secret,*” she finished, her eyes welling up with tears, *“and thus deny all evils entry!”*

Tossing her parents’ wands to the floor, Arjuna closed the front door sharply behind her, just as the violet and gold magic swirled up into its frame and doorknob and sealed it shut, trapping her parents inside with the enchantment she had cast.

‘Don’t let them follow me,’ Arjuna ordered the door fiercely.

The doorframe shone bright violet, and there was a terrible *WHAM* on the door that sounded like a blocked Bombardment spell.

Arjuna breathed heavily as she stared at the shut door, her hand still trembling on the doorknob. The wood muffled her parents’ voices, but she could still make them out.

“Arjuna! ARJUNA!”

“Arjuna! Come back! *Come back!*”

“ARJUNA! *NO!* **ARJUNA!**”

Her mother’s confused cries were terrible, but her father’s screams were devastating. It sounded like her name was being ripped out of Rohan’s heart every time he shouted it.

Arjuna brought her hand still holding her wand up to the door and placed her forehead against the wood.

“Forgive me, Papa...Mama,” she whispered.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as Arjuna turned and walked away from the house. Once she’d climbed off the pavement and into the street, she faced the house again and raised her wand high over her head.

“*Protegas Meomnes.*”

As she framed her family’s house with the circle she traced in the air, a beautiful golden dome began to form around the property, encasing the land in translucent light that resembled shining, yellowish glass –

And then, all at once, it vanished from sight.

Taking a deep breath, Arjuna slipped her wand into the pocket in her dark blue dress, gave a slight shiver, and began her thirty-two-block journey to the Belajis’ old house.

Revelation of the Saeva Ward

Arjuna arrived at her destination just before midnight. By the time she approached the modest little two-story house with the dark cherry-colored roof identical to all of the others on the block, her feet were painful and swollen and her face and hands were numb with cold. As soon as she got inside, she wrapped herself up in a fleece blanket she'd found folded up on the back of the couch and limped upstairs toward Rohan's office.

The house was eerie in its emptiness. Most of the furniture looked the same as ever, as Rohan had wanted everything to look normal in case anyone from the Ministry came to call, but there were significantly fewer books, art pieces, and wonderful smells than Arjuna remembered. Everything was so bare-boned and lifeless. Even the air was chillier than before, but Arjuna wasn't sure if she could trust her senses in that case, since exhaustion, fear, and sadness tended to make one feel colder.

Arjuna sat down in the chair in front of Rohan's desk, dragging it with an unpleasant, shrieking scrape across the floor so that she was sitting in front of his black cabinet, which was all sealed up with its four golden locks. She rubbed her frozen hands together quickly, trying to flex the fingers, before she took the first lock in hand.

The lock was emblazoned with the Hindi character for "Dharma," the most important of the Four Purusarthas of Hinduism. The word had no straightforward English translation, but the idea behind it was living according to the *rta*, or natural order of the world, and encompassed one's duty, laws, and virtues.

Despite the complexity of the idea, Arjuna had guessed what her father's answer for such a concept would be the very first time she tried opening the black cabinet, meaning the combination was almost second-nature to her by now.

'M...I...N...I...S...T...R...Y.'

The lock clicked open with a small burst of light blue sparks. As she had during her more recent visits, Arjuna skipped the second lock and moved on to the third, which was inscribed with the character for "Kama," representing desire, passion, or aesthetic pleasure.

'C...H...A...A...Y...A.'

It also clicked open, setting loose a cluster of light green sparks. Then Arjuna picked up the fourth lock, which was decorated with the character for “Moksa,” or the ultimate ideal of human life, which could lead to liberation.

‘B...R...A...H...M...A...N.’

Like the others, the last lock clicked open, setting free a flare of pale pink sparks.

Arjuna’s black eyes then narrowed on the remaining gold lock, still sealed up tight.

This one had long been a thorn in her side. Although she’d figured out the other combinations within a week or so, this lock’s answer had eluded her. The lock second from the top was adorned with the Hindi character for “Artha,” which like Dharma was a bit difficult to translate into English. The word itself could mean “essence” or “purpose,” and it was generally associated with the “means of life,” or anything that allows someone to thrive, like health, security, and economic stability. One could even consider it “worldly success,” in contrast to Moksa, which was reaching a higher level through spiritual enlightenment. Arjuna had tried everything she could think up for this answer: “Justice,” “Knowledge,” “Wisdom,” “History,” “Peace,” “Prosperity”...but none of them worked.

With a shiver, Arjuna started fussing with the second lock.

‘D...U...T...Y?’

The lock gave a familiar cough of black smoke and remained sealed.

Arjuna worked at the lock for the next three hours, before her exhaustion overtook her and she dozed off in her father’s chair. Six hours later, she shot awake, and her heart pounded with terror until her eyes found the clock on the far wall and she realized it was still early morning. Once Arjuna’s heart rate had stabilized, she immediately returned her focus to the lock.

By the time the clock struck 1, Arjuna’s stomach was growling and her fingers were growing tired, but she pushed it down stubbornly, unable to let go of the lock in her hands.

‘What am I missing?’ she thought in frustration.

Her black eyes bore into the lock fiercely, as if she hoped it somehow would give her some clue she hadn't noticed before.

'Artha is the means of life,' she thought for what felt like the thousandth time. 'It's worldly success. It's prosperity. It's what enables one to live, to prosper. If Dharma is what allows one to live an orderly life...then artha is what allows one to live a life that's purposeful – a successful life, a wealthy life –'

Arjuna froze. Wealth...

Rohan seemed to quake. His eyes, identical in color to Arjuna's, rippled in anguish.

"Arjuna, gehna, listen...there's so much about this that you don't understand –"

Rohan Belaji only ever used nicknames for the people he loved. Chaaya was "*malikaa*," or "queen." Arjuna was "*gehna*" – "jewel."

Her eyes widening, Arjuna hesitantly shifted the lock, entering each letter one at a time.

'A...R...J...U...N...A.'

In an instant, as if none of the last ten hours had happened, the lock clicked open effortlessly, setting off a tiny explosion of yellowish sparks.

Arjuna looked down at the open lock in her hand, disbelieving. The minutes dragged on as she stared at it, her black eyes welling up with tears.

All this time, she'd struggled to fathom what her father could have seen as the meaning of his life –

what word could represent his greatest success – and all along...

Arjuna shut her eyes and covered her face with both hands in a desperate attempt to compose herself. She took a deep breath, choking back the pain in her throat, and wiped her eyes quickly with both hands, before she reached forward and yanked open the top drawer of the black cabinet.

Inside were many violet-colored files, all assigned bizarre codenames like “*Pendulum*” and “*Hourglass*.” When Arjuna took the first row of files out, however, she found that all of them, as well as the inside of the drawer, were covered in dust.

‘These haven’t been used in a while,’ she concluded solemnly.

Laying the files down on the carpet, Arjuna opened the bottom drawer. Once she’d pulled out some of the violet files from this drawer, however, the remaining folders shifted forward, revealing a thick, mustard yellow file in the very back of the drawer. The tab on top of the file was labeled with neat, dark scarlet lettering.

SAEVA WARD

‘I’ve never heard of that part of St. Mungo’s before,’ Arjuna thought, her eyebrows knitting together in confusion. *‘And Papa’s a historian. Why would he need medical information?’*

The youngest Abraxan frowned deeply as she slid the mustard yellow file out of the cabinet and flipped it open.

The file was comprised of a stack of parchment with large moving pictures attached to the corner of each one. Every page was also labeled with a name: Alan Godspeed, Eleanor Bradstone, Donaghan Tremlett...

‘The missing files!’ Arjuna realized excitedly. *‘These are the files Dolohov gave the Department of Mysteries!’*

She looked down at the picture attached to the first page: it held a rather pretty blond witch bouncing a little boy with black hair and eyes as blue as hers on her knee, and the image had been

crossed out with a terrible red "X."

Arjuna flipped the picture over to read the information on the other side.

Name: William Elias Smith-Clearwater

Blood Status: Mixed (mother: Penelope Smith-Clearwater, Mudblood; father: Thaddeus Smith-Clearwater, Pureblood)

Birthday: June 12, 1995

School(s) of study: N/A

Previous employment: N/A

Wand: N/A

Ward Division: Childcare

Area of Study: Blood dilution

Notes: Only son of an unusually powerful Mudblood mother and a Pureblood father. Mother convicted of stealing magic and Father convicted of aiding and abetting the theft of magic. Subject given sufficient quantities of food and drink, but was resistant to Mediwizard care. Subject highly combative during examination process. On Chief Auror's direction, subject denied food until cooperation was achieved. Blood under examination for magical signatures that can be extracted.

Update as of 2 October 1997: Expired of malnutrition.

Arjuna's face was as white as a sheet. *Expired?* Then – then that meant that – !

She flipped to the next photograph: a teenage wizard with brown hair and oversized front teeth, similarly crossed out.

Notes: Third son of a Pureblood mother and a half-blood father. Older sister convicted of aiding and abetting Mudblood fugitives. Parents and older brother under surveillance. Despite above-average magical pedigree, subject has expressed no magical talent. On Senior Undersecretary's direction, subject offered chance of visitation if cooperative, but subject has been unresponsive.

Update as 20 November 1997: Expired after failed blood transfusion.

Her heart pounding with more terror than ever, Arjuna shoved through the other files.

Expired by asphyxiation –

Expired by blood loss –

Expired by own hand –

There were at least ten crossed-out pictures – faces of young men and women and small children, scratched out by scarlet ink –

Arjuna felt like the room was spinning. She covered her mouth and turned away, trying desperately to suppress the gagging sensation at the back of her throat.

This was why Rohan looked like a ghost whenever he returned to their safe house in the evenings. *This* was the activity that Rohan wanted to distract Thicknesse's cronies away from. *This* was what Dolohov and Montmercy had been so desperate to keep under-wraps that they entrusted it to the Department of Mysteries –

The Ministry wasn't just sending Muggle-borns, Squibs, and Guilders to Azkaban. They were taking subjects aside, locking them up, and using them as *test subjects* to prove their gross theories about magical eugenics, the same way that the Ministry had twisted Rohan's discoveries into proof

of their bogus history.

This ward – the Saeva Ward – was a torture chamber masquerading as medical care, or worse, as *research*.

A terrible thought ran through Arjuna's mind, and in an instant, she barreled through the rest of the files. She didn't even care if the red Xs were becoming less frequent as she scanned the stack – there was only one picture she needed to find – *needed* to see –

Toward the very back of the stack, she finally found it: a picture of a dark-skinned girl about her age dressed in Slytherin robes with intricately braided dark hair and a gorgeous, blazing white smile.

It was Bridget...and her picture was as beautifully clear as if it had been pasted into a scrapbook.

Arjuna's face stretched into a smile so big and relieved it hurt her cheeks.

The picture wasn't crossed out! Bridget was alive – she was *alive*!

Her heart pounding at the front of her chest, Arjuna flipped the picture over to read Bridget's file.

Name: Bridget Rhapsody Jaheem

Blood Status: Mudblood

Birthday: November 13, 1982

School(s) of study: Hogwarts (house: Slytherin)

Previous employment: N/A

Wand: Ebony, Dragon heartstring, 11 inches, temperamental (confiscated at trial)

Ward Division: Junior

Area of Study: Magic extraction

Notes: Only child of two Muggle parents. Subject's magical capacity remarkable for her kind (successfully restrained over 50 Ministry employees with non-verbal, wandless magic). Both legs broken before admittance. Subject frequently resistant to Mediwizard care and examination. On Chief Auror's direction, subject has been disciplined, but discipline has been ineffective. Multiple escape attempts. On Chief Auror's direction, subject was deprived of food until cooperation was achieved, but subject fed by fellow inmate (see file for Donaghan Tremlett). On Senior Undersecretary's direction, subject has been moved into solitary confinement for one month's time.

Arjuna felt as though both her heart and stomach were being squeezed in someone's fist.

Bridget was alive. Even after everything she'd been through, she was *alive*. But she, and the rest of the people in the Saeva Ward, was in danger, and at that moment, Arjuna was the only person who could tell anyone about it –

Her shoulders trembling, Arjuna moved to her father's desk and took out three pieces of parchment. She picked up an abandoned quill and dipped it in some ink. Before she could bring the quill down to the parchment, however, she found herself hesitating.

'I should write a pamphlet about it,' she thought to herself. *'It'd be easier to get the word out if Roger and Eddie were able to print something summarizing all this –'*

The thought of Roger, Eddie, and Julien, coupled with the memory of three wands falling into the snow, made Arjuna's heart clench.

'No, I can't take that risk. Potterwatch needs to get these files, all of them. We can write something about them later – after everything's dealt with –'

A ripple of nausea ran over Arjuna, and she buried her mouth and nose into the crook of her arm, breathing in and out shakily.

She didn't know what would happen. She didn't know if she'd be able to save her friends – if she'd be able to stop what she'd seen from coming true –

Arjuna stared down at the blank pages before her for a long moment. Then, finally, very slowly, she began to write. She wrote for three whole pages, folded them up, and then wrote two more letters. She sealed the set of three pages and the last letter into two small envelopes, before putting those two envelopes and the second letter into a larger envelope that she labeled with a scribbled “*Potterwatch*.”

Deciding she'd need something warmer to wear if she was going out again, Arjuna rummaged around the office closet. There she found a pair of thick boots and one of her mother's old white wool coats, which were both a little large on her, but were serviceable enough that she decided to make do. She also found a worn brown satchel, in which she packed all of Rohan's files, including the mustard yellow one. She then put her wand and the Muggle pounds she'd found in Rohan's desk drawer into her coat pocket, grabbed the envelope and the briefcase, and left the house, whispering her full name to the door lock so that it would seal back up again behind her.

The eclipse was set to align over the Caribbean just before 5:00 BST. She didn't have much time left.

“*Level one*,” said the cool, serene female voice of the lift as the doors clanged open. “*Offices of the Minister of Magic and Support Staff*.”

Julien sidled out, avoiding eye contact with the Ministry employees hastening to take his place inside of the lift so they could get downstairs to their departments. As he stepped out, his scarlet Auror robes billowing, he looked almost grimly at the Floo Network grates where many witches and wizards were exiting the Ministry, before reluctantly turning away from them and heading toward the back of the hall.

The Minister of Magic's office, as well as the offices belonging to members of his staff, had been given additional protections. There was now a gate made of wrought black iron that one could only open by surrendering one's wand and by having the proper clearance of an employee on the other side.

Julien halfheartedly slipped his wand into the awaiting tray in the gate, which immediately closed like the jaw of some menacing bullfrog. Then the gate gave a loud rattle that echoed through the walls of the entire department.

A moment later a familiar, freckled face with horn-rimmed rectangular glasses appeared on the other side of the gate. His ginger hair was combed neatly, but his face was noticeably paler and thinner than it had been when he was Head Boy.

“Hello, Weasley,” said Julien.

Percy Weasley offered the younger man a weak smile, but it faded quickly.

“Did your father summon you?” he asked lowly.

“Naturally,” snorted Julien derisively.

Percy’s eyebrows knitted tightly over his blue eyes. Noticing the other man’s concern, Julien’s expression turned more solemn.

“Don’t worry,” he said a little more quietly. “I can handle it.”

“Hopefully so,” murmured Percy. He glanced quickly behind him, making sure there was no one who could overhear. “...Any lunar news?”

Julien frowned. “No. The Moon hasn’t appeared at all since Eddie was almost caught. I’m getting worried – it’s not like her to disappear on such dark nights.”

His brow creasing with concern, Percy opened his mouth as if to say something else, but at that very moment, the door of the Senior Undersecretary’s office opened and a man stepped out of it.

Despite his age, Etienne Montmercy looked younger than many of his fellow Death Eaters. His oval-shaped face, strong jaw, and ice blue eyes were nearly identical to Julien’s, though his blond

hair was more buoyant and curly than his son's more restrained locks. He was dressed in gold robes with black trim on the pockets, belted waist, collar, and cufflinks, and at the sight of Julien, his eyes lit up, narrowing almost to slits when he smiled.

"Oh *good*, Lydia, you're here – one side, will you, Weasley?"

He brought a hand up to Percy's face and not so subtly pushed the underling aside so that he could open the gate and grab hold of Julien's arm with his other, leading his stiff-shouldered son down the hall toward his office. Once he'd led Julien inside, Etienne closed the door behind them and locked it with a quiet *clack*.

Julien hated his father's office more than any other place on Earth. It seemed like it *should* have been very comfortable: the room was painted a bright yellow with golden line accents, it had squishy armchairs rather than office chairs, and there were baby pictures of Julien hanging up on the walls. But these attempts at warmth were only skin-deep. The armchairs, in contrast to the high-backed leather chair behind the desk, were low to the ground, making it so that even the tallest people would have to look up at their host. They also took up a lot of space – Julien could barely walk around the room, due to the bulkiness of the furniture, which made him constantly feel like he was being hemmed in. The cheeriness of the paint color was almost oppressive, and the lines, rather than make the room look any taller, only gave off the impression of prison bars. Every picture of Julien that Etienne owned was of him as a baby, dressed in frilly dresses and night shifts – or, in other words, the only time Etienne really knew him, since he'd never bothered to get to know his child or wife since.

"Go ahead and sit down, darling," said Etienne, gesturing to the white armchair set up in front of his desk.

Even though he would've much preferred to stand, Julien bit his tongue and did as he was told. Once the Auror was seated, Etienne shoved the armchair closer to the desk, almost trapping Julien in it, and then came around and settled into his own much higher chair. The Senior Undersecretary uncorked a bottle of white wine and poured it into two glasses.

"Here you are," he said lightly, as he plopped a glass down in front of Julien.

Julien kept his face as stony as he could. "I've already told you, Father – I don't drink."

"Now how will that change, if you don't try?" said Etienne with a wry smile. "Besides, every young lady should acquire an appreciation for fine wines."

He took a sip from his glass. Upon noticing Julien had not sampled his wine yet, Etienne looked faintly miffed.

“Well, go on, then,” he said, his voice almost forceful in its feigned kindness. “I want to know what you think of it – I suggested it to Uric, for your wedding toast.”

Julien felt a ball of nausea crop up in the back of his throat at the thought of his “fiancé” and looked away in an attempt to hide his displeasure.

“Is that why you called me here? To try a glass of wine?”

Etienne’s eyes narrowed and he lowered his glass back onto the desk with a quiet *clink*.

“No, actually,” he said a little more quietly. “I wanted to speak with you about that boy you’ve been spending time with – Edward Carmichael, is it?”

Julien felt his stomach drop, but he didn’t let any of his concern show on his face. If nothing else, the wording of Etienne’s sentiment made Julien give pause.

“I have been working with Eddie Carmichael, yes,” he said calmly. “We *are* in the same department.”

Etienne frowned deeply. “And is that *all* there is between you?”

Julien wanted to laugh at the suggestion, given that Eddie was as straight as a razor blade, but he didn’t dare.

“That’s all,” he said instead.

His lips still twitching with a frown, Etienne picked up his wine glass again, rocking it in his hand so the liquid inside bobbed back and forth.

“Antonin has said that you’ve been conversing often...even during off-hours.”

Julien’s eyes narrowed. “One can discuss work during off-hours. And we *were* in the same year at Hogwarts – we aren’t strangers – ”

“It would be best if you *were* strangers,” Etienne said sharply. “You are engaged to the bright young heir of a good, hard-working family – you can’t afford to be distracted by an orphan boy adopted by two wifeless wizards.”

Julien opened his mouth to argue, but Etienne cut him off.

“Men all want the same thing, Lydia – even if you think what you have is just a friendship, I assure you, it will only lead to ruin, for you and for your family. After all, your mother and I have never strayed from each other...even after I went to Azkaban, I retained my vows – ”

“You’re reading too much into it,” Julien cut him off harshly. He wished he’d been able to hold his temper back a little better, but the thought of Etienne equating his wife Antoinette’s love of independence with his own expectation that she’d *wait* for him made him feel ill.

“I *know* you, Lydia,” said Etienne sharply, his ice blue eyes flaring with a twisted kind of righteous fury. “You’re my flesh – my blood. You don’t think I wouldn’t know if you were keeping secrets?”

“You were in Azkaban almost my entire life!” said Julien incredulously.

“And you are my *daughter*!” Etienne shot back vehemently.

Seeming almost scared of his own anger, the Senior Undersecretary abruptly quieted. Then, putting on his gentlest smile, he spoke again, his voice so desperate to be sympathetic it was almost cloying.

“...Lydia...you know I love you, and I only want what’s best for you. The Montmercy family was built on keeping the promises we make. Your mother vowed loyalty to me, and I to her – I pledged my loyalty to the Dark Lord, to my comrades in arms – ”

Etienne reached forward and seized hold of Julien's shoulder.

"And now it's your turn, my sweet, darling girl. You have a promise to keep, and a handsome young man counting on you to keep it."

"*Handsome young man*" was the last thing Julien would ever have called the obnoxious, bigoted trash writer he was engaged to marry...but he knew that if he argued further, it would only heighten Etienne's suspicions. To quiet them, at least for now, Julien knew he had to play along...and so he inclined his head in a small nod.

"...Yes, Father."

Smiling a little more broadly, Etienne brought a hand through Julien's hair.

"You are growing your hair out, like I suggested?" he asked lightly. "Your mother's old veil would look much better if your hair were longer."

"Yes," Julien lied under his breath. He resisted the urge to pull away with difficulty.

"Hmm – maybe Sleekeasy's has something that can make it grow faster..."

Etienne withdrew his hand with a flourish.

"Now then, I have a lot of work still to get to – you should get on home to your mother. I'll be along this evening."

Julien had never been more relieved by a dismissal in his life. Rising to his feet, he pushed the armchair back away from his father's desk, unlocked the door, and without another word left the office.

Once his child was out of sight, Etienne's smile slid off his face so cleanly it was as if he'd wiped it off with a handkerchief. The lack of warmth completely transformed his face – it suddenly appeared so unapproachable and cold that even the light in his eyes seemed as hard as stone.

He raised his arm, lifting up the right sleeve to reveal the pitch black Dark Mark emblazoned on the pale skin. Then, withdrawing his wand from the inside of his robes, he traced the Mark with the tip.

“Thorfinn,” he murmured softly to the Dark Mark, as it glowed a sickly yellowish green, “kindly follow my darling Lydia, will you? Make sure she goes straight home...and alert me if she doesn’t.”

The Three Fallen Wands

Classes were in full swing at the Royal Holloway, University of London. Thanks to the falling snow and the chill in the air, the students and faculty walked with more purpose toward the buildings, camping out under archways to wait for their colleagues. The crisp white layer over the grounds did not detract from the beauty of the usually bright green campus, however – instead the white snow framed and trimmed the scarlet brick so elegantly that it looked like something out of a Christmas card.

Julien knew that Eddie and Roger would've much preferred to meet in the late evening, after all the Muggles were in bed, but thanks to Etienne Montmercy's strict regulation of his family's activities, it was much easier for Julien to sneak out right after work.

"Still, I guess having the Muggles around would provide us with an ideal smoke screen," Roger had pointed out when they first discussed the issue. "If we dress in Muggle clothes too, then we'd just look like three average students, and our work would just look like a shared homework assignment."

This was why Julien was dressed in a teal trench coat, a purple collared shirt, white slacks, and tall black boots, rather than his scarlet Auror robes. He wasn't used to dressing in Muggle clothes since he had almost no experience with the Muggle World, but the trench coat was similar enough to dress robes that he felt comfortable enough. Plus it was nice to clean off all the awful makeup he had to wear at work to put his father and Uric at ease.

"Julien!"

Julien looked up toward the queenly statue at the center of the grounds and found Eddie and Roger already waiting for him. Eddie was wearing bleached jeans and a blue and white letterman jacket with the Royal Holloway crest on its left breast, while Roger was dressed in a black turtleneck, a puffy maroon coat, and black slacks. Eddie was waving broadly at Julien, his arm high over his head.

Julien strode over, and the men exchanged quick, static handshakes and smiles.

"Any word from R.J. Moon?" asked Julien.

Roger and Eddie's faces both fell noticeably. Eddie looked down at his feet, his hazel eyes

narrowing in frustration.

“None,” said Roger quietly. “It hasn’t been safe to go back into her neighborhood, thanks to her father’s report. Even so, Arjuna’s more than clever enough to contact us some other way – send us a pamphlet or even just a message...”

“But she hasn’t,” finished Julien grimly.

Eddie clenched his fists at his side.

“She might be having trouble getting the word out,” Roger said gently, “but I know her father will keep her safe. Even him keeping us at bay must be in service of that.”

Julien nodded in agreement.

“What about you, Eddie?” he asked after a moment. “What happened with Dolohov?”

Roger looked at Eddie, startled. Eddie scowled.

“Dolohov invited me to his office today, along with a few others,” the hazel-eyed Auror explained. “He said he needed a volunteer for a ‘*special project*’ he was working on, so I put my name in for consideration. Dolohov then had me meet him for a formal interview. I thought for sure I’d get it, given my family’s reputation, but Dolohov passed me over for that new Bulgarian transfer.”

“That creep with the dark circles around his eyes?” said Julien, and Eddie nodded.

“Do you reckon there’s any chance we could recruit him?” asked Roger.

“No,” Julien and Eddie both said in unison.

“Old *Vladimir* or whatever his name is got picked because of his knowledge of the Dark Arts,” said Eddie sourly. “We were all in that room together for the interview, and the bloke decided to prove his *talents* by demonstrating his own, more intense variation of the Conjunctivitis Curse on

Jake Polson. Polson was in so much pain that nothing I did helped – only Skull-Eyes could undo it, with a countercurse he'd made himself, of course."

"He seems shady," agreed Julien, his eyes narrowing sharply. "He's very quiet, which I would normally have no issue with...but he pops up as silently as a ghost and then disappears just as fast. Not to mention the weird looks he gives everybody – it seems like he knows a lot more about all of us than he would ever admit to."

Roger sighed. "It was worth a try, I guess..."

"EDDIE! ROGER! JULIEN!"

All three wizards looked up. Bounding toward them, looking out of breath and sickly pale, was a girl dressed in an oversized white coat and brown boots over a navy blue turtleneck dress and white tights. Her black braid flew behind her like a flag in the cold winter air.

Julien, Roger, and Eddie straightened up, their eyes widening and their faces brightening.

"*Arjuna!*"

Eddie dashed forward, throwing his arms out to snatch Arjuna up in a big bear hug.

"R.J., I can't believe it!" he cried. "We were so *worried* about you!"

He gave her a relieved squeeze, before immediately looking down at her with a look that was half critical, half anxious.

"How the hell did you *get* here?"

Arjuna was having trouble catching her breath.

"No – no time – " she gasped frantically, "you've got to – go! *Now!*"

“What?” said Eddie, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“You’ve got to – go – all of you! The eclipse – you’ve got to – before – ”

Eddie glanced at Roger and Julien, who’d come up beside him, his hazel eyes rippling with concern. Roger bent down next to Arjuna, taking hold of her shoulder.

“Arjuna, slow down,” he said, his voice gentle but still very down-to-earth. “*Breathe*. Start from the beginning – what’s going on?”

“There’s no time!” said Arjuna desperately. The youngest Abraxan wanted to calm down, but she couldn’t stop. Her urgency was a treadmill set at a ridiculously high setting, making her heart race trying to catch up. “Please! I had a vision – if you don’t get out of here now, then you’re all going to die!”

Julien gave a start. “A *vision*?”

“You’re a Seer?” said Eddie, looking just as taken aback.

Arjuna’s distress had started to attract attention from some of the Muggle students and faculty close to the buildings, even if they couldn’t make out what she or the others were saying. Noticing the attention they were receiving, Julien turned to his comrades urgently.

“Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Roger shot to his feet, glancing around at the Muggle bystanders. “But – ”

“If we’re the targets of whatever is to happen, then the best protection we could offer this place is to leave it,” Julien said harshly. “Am I right?”

He looked at Arjuna solemnly. The pale, ill-looking girl gave a shaky nod.

Clenching his jaw, Eddie brought an arm around Arjuna's side, so as to support her.

“We'll go to the safe house: we'll have cover th – ”

BAM!

Out of nowhere, a blast of blood red light shot through the falling white snow toward them. Eddie instinctively shoved both Arjuna and himself out of the way, covering her with his body as they landed in a clump on the ground.

More blasts of colored light shot through the air. The Muggle spectators screamed, running from the campus as fast as they could, as robed figures started appearing out of the snow. Alas, when the students tried to flee, they were cut down by emerald green Killing Curses or scarlet Bombardment Spells, which crashed into the red bricks of the university.

His face going white with terror, Eddie shot to his feet, whipping out his wand. Roger and Julien had already taken out theirs as well. Julien non-verbally blocked one of the scarlet spells being chucked at him, sending it hurtling into the base of the queenly statue. A large shard of brick was blasted off one of the university walls, and Eddie raised his wand and silently blasted it apart before it could crush them.

“Get to the safe house!” he bellowed fiercely at the others. “I'll hold them off!”

“Like Hell I'll leave you here alone!” snarled Julien.

He nonverbally summoned the piece of brick from the ground and swung it around his head, hurtling it at the Death Eaters and throwing two off their feet.

“Arjuna has the *Trace* on her!” Eddie shot back furiously. “If she uses magic, then the Ministry will know she's here!”

The cloaked shadows of the Death Eaters began to advance, multiplying around the entrances. A siege of neon yellow sparks slashed through the air, smashing windows.

“*Protego!*” cried Roger, blocking the shattered glass that came down like rain upon their heads. Moving forward, he shot an arm out, wrapping it around Arjuna to support her as Eddie had. “I’ll get Arjuna out of here – you all come right after us, you hear?!”

Before Arjuna could protest, Roger bolted with her across the campus as fast as he could, as Eddie and Julien charged toward the shadows, blasting spells in retaliation. Roger held his wand aloft, summoning a lavender-colored fog that surrounded them, hiding them from sight. Multi-colored spells shot through the fog, and Roger blocked them with difficulty as he shoved his way through the mist toward the wall surrounding the campus.

“We’re almost there, Arjuna,” he told her reassuringly. “Once we get past the wall, we – ”

Out of the fog came a shadowy shape. A green flare flashed through the air, just barely missing Roger’s ear. Roger jumped in front of Arjuna and blasted several spells in the shadow’s direction, which the stranger blocked.

Smash! Smash!

Two of the spells collided with the wall – the third did not, instead soaring right through the mist into the air.

“The wall!” said Roger in a delighted whisper. “The end of the wall is behind us!”

Arjuna felt Roger steer her around by the shoulders so he could turn her around. Then she suddenly felt a bizarre, cold sensation trickling through her hair and down her neck, and suddenly Roger shoved Arjuna outside the barrier of lavender fog. She lost her balance and landed on the snow-covered ground with a clumsy *flump*.

“*Roger!*”

She stumbled to her feet, but before she could take another step, Roger shouted back.

“They can’t see you! Get to the house – I’ll be right behind you!”

Arjuna looked down at her hands, and with a shock, she realized what Roger meant. She could just barely see the outline of her fingers, for they were suddenly the same colors as the snow-capped ground beneath her. It was like she'd become a human chameleon.

Contrary to Roger's orders, however, Arjuna didn't move. She couldn't – her legs were quaking under her.

She'd tried so hard to make it – tried so hard to stop what happened – but she'd failed. She hadn't made it in time to protect them. If she'd just made it a few minutes sooner, maybe they all would've gotten out before –

The blasts intensified, but Arjuna was still rooted to the spot.

They should have Apparated, she thought to herself. They should have fled – gotten somewhere safe, *anywhere* safe...but she knew why they didn't. If they'd Apparated too soon, it would have alarmed the Muggles. If they'd Apparated once the Death Eaters arrived, then the Muggles would be sitting ducks. Eddie and Julien had to lead the Death Eaters away from the campus, if they had any hope of saving the people in it.

The flares of light and the sounds accompanying them began to fade, and Arjuna's heart pounded with terror. At first she thought that Roger was weakening, but then the truth hit her in the heart.

Roger was pushing the battle away from Arjuna – back toward the campus, where Eddie and Julien were. He wasn't planning on following along behind Arjuna at all: he'd only said that so she would go on without him, while he doubled back and joined the others.

PEW! PEW!

Two flares, one yellow and the other white, soared into the air, exploding like fireworks over the university. Instead of fading, however, the flares grew and expanded into translucent shields that spread over the campus.

The Death Eaters were fencing in their prey – blocking them off from the outside.

Arjuna looked down at her Disillusioned hands and the wand in her pocket, her black eyes rippling with terror and pain.

It truly seemed hopeless – but if she ran away now, if she saved herself and didn't at least *try* to save them –

Her narrowed eyes filling with tears, she shakily charged back into the lavender smoke.

Julien saw the shields forming overhead too, and his ice blue eyes widened in fear. He needed to find Eddie, but the scarlet and green light of the curses being hurled at him from all directions made it difficult for him to see anything beyond.

“*Eddie!*” he shouted through the melee.

The Slytherin Auror shot a Hurling Hex at one Death Eater, sending him spinning away in rapid circles through the air so that he collided with a second. Then, ducking an orange hex, Julien conjured a sinkhole under the feet of a third Death Eater and wordlessly Disarmed him, jumping over the fallen man and charging ahead. Everything was becoming darker – it was as if the sun itself was being blocked out –

The yellow and white shields had started to arch back down toward the ground. Arjuna forced herself to keep running, even as her heart raced and her vision blurred. The exhaustion she'd been fighting back for the last 24 hours was catching up with her, but she fought it as best she could, throwing her legs one in front of the other faster and faster –

Finally, with one more rush of strength, she hurled herself toward the shield. She landed with a *thud* and rolled in a ball through the snow, reaching the other side of the yellowish white barrier just in time.

Breathing heavily and trembling all over, Arjuna stumbled to her feet, glancing at the shield now mere inches from the ground.

There was no turning back now...

She absently reached for her wand. When her hand reached her coat pocket, though, she found it was gone.

'It must have fallen out!' she realized in a panic.

She hurriedly sat up, looking around desperately for her wand. When she turned around, she found a stranger in black-trimmed gold robes standing over her, her wand dangling between his fingers.

He hadn't seen her at first, thanks to the Disillusionment Spell Roger had cast, but once he heard the rustling of grass that accompanied her frantic search for her wand, he sensed that there was someone there.

At long last, after running in circles several times, Julien caught sight of a blue and white letterman jacket in the distance.

"Eddie!" he cried. "They're putting up Anti-Apparition Shields – they're trying to trap us!"

Eddie blasted a Death Eater off his feet before looking up at the descending shields. His heart flaring with terror, the Ravenclaw Auror ran toward his Slytherin cohort, reaching out his hand. He could always use Side-Along Apparition – then at least *they* would end up in the same place, maybe just outside the grounds –

"AH!"

Eddie was thrown forward off his feet and his wand went flying out of his hands. A very slender Death Eater came sweeping down on him, green light blazing from his wand –

"GYAAAAH!"

Julien slashed at the air, hurtling a violent white spell at the Death Eater's face and cutting it open. Once he'd fallen back, Julien used a nonverbal Body-Bind Curse, lashing the man's limbs together and slamming him roughly into a snow bank.

Eddie rolled across the ground, snatching up his wand. The threat averted, he looked up just in time for the yellowish white shield to reach the ground, creating a bubble around the center of the campus just inside its brick walls.

“*No!*” murmured Eddie, his hazel eyes very wide.

He was so alarmed that he didn’t see a shorter Death Eater coming up behind him. Fortunately, at that moment, Roger appeared out of nowhere and hurled himself in front of Eddie, summoning a Shield Charm around both of them.

“*Protego!*”

The scarlet curse bounded off, colliding with the clear shield. Unlike the other surfaces the Death Eaters’ spells had smashed into, though, the shield was unaffected by the force – instead it absorbed it, taking in the blaze of light until it had faded away completely.

“*Stupefy!*” Roger shouted.

In a flash the Death Eater was thrown to the ground in an unconscious heap.

“*Roger!*” said Eddie, his voice torn between anger and anxiety. “You’re supposed to be – ”

“Arjuna’s out,” said Roger firmly. “I sent her on ahead. Besides...with these shields up, there’s now no way she could come back anyway.”

He glanced gloomily up at the translucent shields.

Eddie looked almost beside himself in his anxiety. “Roger, you should’ve gone *with* her! *Taylor’s* back at the house – your son – ”

Roger faced Eddie grimly. “...I know. But...I *couldn’t* just do nothing, if I had any chance of helping. You and Julien are my mates.”

Eddie blinked back tears of frustration, glancing away so he wouldn't have to look Roger in the eye. Roger reached out and rested a hand on Eddie's shoulder; Eddie followed suit, and they squeezed each other's shoulders in an abridged hug.

Having finally shaken off two other Death Eaters, Julien ran over to Eddie and Roger's side, looking just as pale.

"Eddie," the ex-Head Girl said urgently, "the shield will keep the Muggles out of harm's way, since it's impenetrable on both sides...but we won't be able to Apparate..."

The black-cloaked figures slid out of the growing darkness, creating a tight-knit circle around the trio of wizards. Eddie clenched his wand tighter, his eyes flaring.

"Then we'll fight," he said in determination. "We'll fight until we fall!"

"Will you now?"

The three men stiffened. Out of the ranks of the black-robed figures stepped a blond-haired wizard with ice blue eyes dressed in elegant gold dress robes.

It was Etienne Montmercy. In one hand he held a thin, light-colored wand made of carved Alder wood, and under the other arm he held a dark-haired girl dressed in an oversized white coat up against his side.

"*Arjuna!*" cried Roger, his heart flaring with anxiety.

He, Eddie, and Julien involuntarily bolted forward, but Montmercy immediately pointed the tip of his wand at Arjuna's forehead, and they all halted mid-step.

"So she *is* with you," Montmercy said coolly. "How interesting...but I suppose it would've been far too much of a coincidence for an underage witch to have stumbled upon an arrest in progress."

The Senior Undersecretary's ice blue eyes glided over the three before landing on Julien.

"...Lydia, what in the world are you *wearing*?" he asked, his voice low with the kind of lackadaisical disapproval that one might express to a dog that peed on the carpet. "People would think you were some half-wit Muggle boy, dressed like that..."

Julien looked like he wanted to retort, but his focus was squarely locked on Arjuna. Despite the visible terror in her sickly face, the youngest Abraxan put forward as much bravery as she could, clenching her jaw tightly.

"Father – " Julien started uneasily.

He flinched when his father tapped the top of Arjuna's head with his wand. Fortunately no spells had been cast.

"I admit," Montmercy continued, keeping his voice light despite the coldness seeping in at the edges, "I'm disappointed. To find you spending time with people who frequent slums like this...I had thought better of you. But then again, I *did* warn you that spending time with Mr. Carmichael would only bring us trouble. I just had no concept of just what sort of trouble I meant..."

Montmercy idly pressed the tip of his wand into Arjuna's cheek.

"Father," Julien started again, a little more anxiously, "please – "

"It's just fortunate that I thought to have you followed!" Montmercy cut him off, sounding almost cheerful were it not for the stormy cloud hovering at the back of his throat. "Why, if I hadn't, who *knows* what might have happened? These men might have tempted you, corrupted you – turned you against the Ministry – against your own family – !"

Montmercy's wand started to glow red and the light singed Arjuna's cheek. Arjuna closed her eyes tight and gritted her teeth, but did not make a sound.

"Father, *stop*!" Julien burst out before he could stop himself. "Please, let her go!"

Montmercy considered Julien for a moment. His ice blue eyes were so devoid of emotion they were like the eyes on some china doll, even when they narrowed ever-so-slightly.

“Throw down your wands, and I shall release your little friend. Are we understood?”

“*No!*”

Arjuna struggled against Montmercy’s hold, but the older man tightened his grip around her neck in an attempt to restrain her.

“Don’t do it!” Arjuna beseeched her comrades, her black eyes wide and scared. “Don’t put down your wands!”

Montmercy shot the Death Eater beside him, Thorfinn Rowle, a significant look. With a twisted grin Rowle raised his wand and in an instant, Arjuna had crumpled up under Montmercy’s arm, biting back cries of pain. Julien heard Eddie inhale sharply behind him.

“Your wands,” Montmercy said with a cold, level tone, as his eyes bore into Julien, Eddie, and Roger. “*Now.*”

Julien looked at the others, his eyes rippling with conflict. Eddie took a step forward, standing between his two shorter compatriots and glancing from one to the other. Then, clenching his jaw, he held out his wand. Roger and Julien followed suit, holding their wands out in front of them, and the three young men dropped their wands at the same time, the thin pieces of wood colliding with the snowy ground with a soft *flump*.

“*NO!*” Arjuna screamed, her voice torn in heart-wrenching despair. “*No – no!*”

“Now, was that so difficult?” asked Montmercy lightly, though his voice wasn’t the least bit comforting as Rowle stepped forward and snatched up the three wands.

In a careless gesture, he flung Arjuna to the ground, trudging through the snow toward Julien. Once he’d reached him, he brought an arm around Julien and steered his child back toward where he had originally been standing beside his fellow Death Eaters.

“Now then, Lydia,” the Senior Undersecretary said idly, “I still have some work to do here, but Argo here is going to escort you home...”

Julien came to a forceful halt, yanking out of Montmercy’s grip. “*What?*”

Montmercy was startled by Julien’s outburst, but played it off casually. “Not to fret, darling – I won’t be long.”

“What are you going to do to them?” Julien demanded, glancing back at Eddie and Roger as they helped Arjuna up and brought their arms around her protectively.

“What befits their offense,” Montmercy answered nonchalantly.

“No!” cried Julien. “Father, please – they’ve done nothing – ”

Montmercy’s eyebrows rose. “*Nothing?* Lydia, my darling, Thorfinn heard you and your friends discussing the infamous ‘*R.J. Moon*’ – the publisher of those truth-less pamphlets that promote overthrowing the Ministry of Magic. A publisher that, it turns out...” his ice blue eyes flashed in Arjuna’s direction, “...is this sixteen-year-old witch.”

The other Death Eaters looked incredulous. Some even looked close to laughter.

“Etienne, you can’t be serious,” scoffed Rowle. “You can’t really think that this *little girl* could be _”

“Never underestimate the young, Thorfinn,” said Montmercy, his tone remaining level despite its coldness. “I was but fifteen when I found my true calling – not even in my house of Hufflepuff did I ever feel as protected and accepted as I was by the Dark Lord.”

He flexed the wrist of his wand hand casually as he returned his focus to Julien.

“Treason is not something I can afford to take lightly, given my position. It’s merely fortunate that we were able to round up these rabble-rousers – now they can be suitably punished, and you’ll be free of their poisonous influence – ”

The Death Eater brought up a hand as if to trail it through Julien's short hair. Before he could reach, however, Julien abruptly raised his own hand, slapping Montmercy's out of the way with an audible *SMACK*.

"*No.*"

He strode back toward Eddie, Roger, and Arjuna and stood protectively in front of them.

"Julien – " murmured Arjuna.

Julien ignored her.

"These people are my friends, Father – any fate you deal them, you must also deal me."

Montmercy looked visibly taken aback. "*Friends* – you – "

A bizarre, almost placating smile slowly wound its way onto his lips.

"Oh, Lydia...Lydia, my dearest – *this* is all you know of friendship? I know that finding true friends is not the easiest thing, but to know that the closest you've had is with rats like these – people who've forced you to choose them over your own flesh and blood – "

Montmercy grabbed Julien's arm, yanking him forward into his arms in a rather constraining hug.

"...They don't *deserve* your loyalty, my sweet girl," he hissed in his son's ear.

His ice blue eyes flashing with rage, Julien shoved his father away.

"These *rats* have treated me more like family than you ever have," he spat. "They've showed me respect, kindness – trust – and they've accepted me with open arms, for all that I am...a Slytherin – the child of a Death Eater – even the man I am!"

The Death Eaters around Montmercy started muttering and exchanging confused, disgusted looks. Montmercy went visibly paler.

“*Man?*” he repeated, his voice a mere shadow of its normal self.

Julien plowed on ruthlessly.

“While you’ve done nothing but trample over my life and demand that I sacrifice everything just to please you and your Death Eater buddies, these so-called *rats* gave me a reason to be *proud* of who I am! And I *am* proud! I’m an Abraxan, sure as they are – ”

He turned his back on Montmercy, facing the others with a small smirk that didn’t quite touch his grim ice blue eyes.

“...And standing and falling beside them – not as Lydia Montmercy, but as Julien...that would make me prouder than anything else in this world!”

Eddie and Roger beamed proudly at Julien, wrapping their arms around his shoulders. Her face full of pain and sorrow, Arjuna bowed her head in shame, which made her forehead land against Julien's chest.

“I’m sorry, Julien,” she mumbled, “Roger...Eddie...if I’d just gotten here sooner – I’m so sorry – ”

Julien looked down at Arjuna solemnly. “Hush. You pushed yourself harder than you should have, just trying to help us...”

He trailed a hand along the back of her head, offering her his best smile.

“You were very brave, R.J. – braver than all of us.”

“What...”

Eddie, Roger, Arjuna, and Julien all looked up, startled.

Just behind them, Montmercy had turned away from the group, his head bowed. His shoulders were shaking visibly, his right hand clenched over his wand at his side.

“What...have they done...?”

The Death Eaters surrounding Montmercy watched him with something akin to hesitation. When the Senior Undersecretary slowly turned around to face the Abraxans again, his pupils were so small and hollow inside his wide eyes that he resembled a mad dog.

“*What have they **DONE** to you?!*”

In an instant, the group was blasted apart. Eddie collided with the base of the queenly statue and Roger landed in a snow bank several yards away. Julien just barely kept hold of Arjuna, but was too stunned to prevent his father from coming up behind him and seizing the scruff of his neck.

“**BOMBARDA!**” Montmercy shrieked.

His spell wasn’t as powerful as it should’ve been, but it did successfully blast Arjuna off of Julien, slamming her roughly into the ground.

“No – ” choked Julien, struggling against his father’s tight grip on his collar. Montmercy’s hold didn’t shift at all, however, as he stared down Julien’s friends.

“You shameless, underhanded *filth*,” whispered Montmercy, his wide eyes madder than they’d likely ever been in his life. “It’s not enough that you preach falsehoods to the entire Wizarding World, or that you attempt to undermine the Dark Lord and the Ministry at every turn – no, you must also try to steal and dismantle my greatest treasure, *my only beloved child*! I had thought I might show some mercy and simply give you to the dementors – but now I see that kindness is something you don’t deserve!”

His face both terrified and furious, Julien whirled around and, opening his mouth wide, bit down hard on Montmercy’s wrist. The Death Eater bellowed in pain and his grip slackened – Julien bolted forward toward Arjuna, reaching a hand out to help her to her feet – Montmercy’s face paled in insane fury and terror as he raised his wand –

“*IMPERIO!*”

Julien had just taken Arjuna’s hand when Montmercy’s spell collided with his back. The Slytherin Auror stiffened immediately, his ice blue eyes widening slightly as he stared down at Arjuna. Arjuna stared back, silently pleading with every entity of Fate –

And then, without a word, Julien withdrew his hand from Arjuna’s, dropping her back down on the ground.

“*Julien!*” cried Eddie.

Arjuna’s black eyes were very wide with horror as Julien turned and began to walk back toward his father. Roger dashed over to Arjuna’s side, but Eddie ran to Julien, colliding with him and grabbing his shoulders.

“Julien!” said Eddie, his voice fierce despite its utter desperation. “Julien, *fight it!* Don’t let him – *ack!*”

Julien had twisted Eddie’s arm, ramming it up against his back and using the grip to throw him to the ground face first. Then, his face still unnaturally calm, he continued walking.

Roger whirled on Montmercy with ferocity.

“How *could* you?!” he roared, his blue eyes flaring. “He’s your *son!*”

“*She* is my *daughter!*” Montmercy snarled furiously. “And I will do anything I have to in order to protect her from criminal, Muggle-loving delinquents like you!”

Julien stopped silently just to the right of Montmercy, his ice blue eyes locked on the ground but clearly not seeing it at all. Montmercy placed a hand on his child’s shoulder, the fingers clenching around it in something akin to a vice grip, and the hold seemed to soothe him enough that his shoulders relaxed and his eyes returned to their normal size. Despite the reduced madness in his features, however, Montmercy’s eyes still rippled pure hatred as he stared Arjuna, Roger, and Eddie down as if they were cockroaches.

“I wish no trace of these three to ever be found,” he murmured venomously to Rowle and the other Death Eaters. “Obliterate them.”

With this command, he turned, leading Julien away up the grounds. Rowle turned to the other Death Eaters, his teeth bared in a dementedly gleeful grin.

“Well, you heard ‘im,” he said brightly to the others.

The Death Eaters all raised their wands. Eddie, Roger, and Arjuna clumped together, staring down the wall of black-cloaked figures towering over them with whatever tiny fragments of courage they could scrounge up.

“Our fight won’t end with us,” Eddie murmured to the others.

Roger nodded. “We were never the cause. We were merely messengers – three of many.”

Arjuna squeezed her partners’ hands tightly. She refused to look away from the executioners before her – not even when the emerald green light of their wands overwhelmed her vision and ended it forever.

Eddie Carmichael, Roger Davies, and Arjuna Belaji fell to the snowy ground in a heap, their last noble words heard by no one.

Grief and Gillyflowers

For the next two days, no one knew the fate of the Abraxan leaders. On Etienne Montmercy's orders, all evidence of the confrontation at Royal Holloway had been wiped away, whether through legal means by the Obliviators or less legal ones by the Death Eaters. The Auror called Lydia Montmercy returned to work the next day as if nothing had happened, though his makeup was a touch neater and more stylish than it had ever been previously. When asked about his coworker Eddie Carmichael, the young Slytherin Auror claimed he hadn't seen him, but seemed perfectly unconcerned with actually finding him. Whenever anyone tried to press the issue, his fiancé Uric Cuffe, who had taken to escorting him around even more than usual, would not so subtly shoo the person away.

"It isn't Lydia's responsibility, to know the activities of every person she works with," he said coolly. "And from what I understand Edwin is something of a '*man-about-town*' – I'm sure he'll pop up sooner or later."

But Eddie's fathers and sister, who were also in the Auror Department, didn't believe this. As soon as Eddie didn't come to work Friday morning, they immediately put up missing posters, pleading for information. Without any support from the *Daily Prophet* or the Ministry, however, their cries for help were met largely with indifference.

Roger Davies's disappearance had caused a bit of a buzz among the staff of the *Daily Prophet* too, but as his wife and son had also not been seen in ages, it was thought that the entire family might have quietly left the country. Cuffe, who ran the paper, certainly embraced that chain of thought; in little time at all, he'd removed Roger's name from his list of employees, assigned Roger's office to another staffer, and transferred the funds that would've gone to Roger's pension in the distant future back into his own private accounts.

In the scrapbooks held by nine young witches and wizards, however, there was concern, worry, and flickers of hope that tried desperately to suppress fear.

Arjuna, did everything go all right?

Arjuna, please write as soon as you can.

Hang in there, R.J. – we believe in you.

Has anyone heard anything about Arjuna?

Arjuna, please write soon!

R.J., we're getting worried – please be all right!

Arjuna, where are you?

Alas, they couldn't have known that the dark blue scrapbook belonging to their friend was still sitting innocently under Arjuna's pillow at home, and without its rightful owner present, no one would be able to read their messages.

On the island of Lundy, just off the Bristol Channel, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were camped out just along the coast. There was only one settlement close by with a population of about twenty-five, so the three Gryffindors had found this location considerably quieter and more serene than many of their previous campsites. Just up the hill from where they were camped was a pretty white lighthouse, and late in the evenings the three would watch the searchlight revolve around the top of it, seeking ships in the night.

On the night of the 28th, Ron fumbled through his things and fished out the bright orange radio he'd brought with him. He plopped it down on the table in the center of their tent so he, Harry, and Hermione would be able to hear it.

"What time d'you have, Harry?" he asked, as he rotated the dials experimentally.

"7:42."

"Perfect, one minute left."

Harry's hair had grown shaggier since he and his friends had first started out on their journey. Hermione had tried to keep it trimmed as best she could, but as always, Harry's hair had been ridiculously stubborn and grew however it wanted. Hermione had started plaiting her much longer and bushier hair, so as to keep it out of her face. Ron had even found himself tanning a little – at least, as much as a pale, freckly redhead *could* tan.

As Ron turned the knobs, bouncing back and forth between a magical cooking program and a rendition of Celestina Warbeck's "*You Charmed the Heart Right Out of Me*," Harry watched the minute hand move around his watch carefully. After waiting a few seconds, he spoke again.

“43. Try it now.”

Hermione tapped her wand soundly on top of the radio.

“Sirius,” she said, taking care to enunciate each consonant carefully.

Instantly the static cleared up. For a moment, there was nothing but silence; then the voice of Lee Jordan echoed out of the box.

“...Good evening, loyal listeners of Potterwatch. I’m River, your host, and we’re glad to have you with us.”

Despite his language, however, Lee’s voice was oddly restrained. He spoke more slowly and methodically than usual – as if he were weighing each word very carefully.

“This month has certainly been a long one!” said Lee, his tone almost forceful in its pleasantry. “We apologize for the hiatus, but some of our contributors were tied up with humoring our marvelous Overlords, so we had to find a new place to safely broadcast from. Fortunately their tiny brains have been distracted elsewhere, so we can now get back to our not-so-regularly scheduled programming...”

His voice drifted away, fading into silence. He paused again before proceeding.

“...Before we talk to Royal, Romulus, and Rodent, however...we have an important piece of news to report. Two days ago, on the 26th of February, we received a package from one of Potterwatch’s most diligent correspondents, Arjuna Belaji.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione visibly stiffened.

“*Arjuna!*” whispered Ron in excitement.

Hermione looked relieved too – she brought a hand over her heart and exhaled quietly. Harry, however, felt a foreboding feeling in the back of his chest – news of Arjuna should have been good, but Lee’s voice still just sounded far too quiet...

“There’s a reason you haven’t heard her name on this program before,” said Lee, and a soft smile echoed through his voice, “and it’s that I haven’t used it. But even if you don’t know Arjuna, you certainly know her words. *‘I urge you, my dear, human friend, to not deaden your tears.’ ‘Seek truth, and nothing less.’ ‘Courage is a blade sharpened by the memory of sunshine and the desire to feel it on your face again.’* Arjuna...or, as she’s also known, *‘R.J. Moon’*...has likely inspired you even if you’ve never met her.”

There was a silence. Lee took a deep breath.

“Inside her package were dozens of files she’d smuggled from the desk of a high-ranking Unspeakable in the Department of Mysteries, as well as three letters. The first letter was addressed to the staff at Potterwatch, explaining the contents of the files. The second letter was addressed to Professor Gordon Ramsay, who received it as of 5:21 last night. The final letter...was addressed to all of you.”

There was a rustle of pages.

“...The files in question,” murmured Lee, his voice gaining an odd growl, “reveal that, on the direction of Head Auror Antonin Dolohov and Senior Undersecretary Etienne Montmercy...the Department of Mysteries has created a new institution known as the *‘Saeva Ward.’* The so-called Ward’s goal is researching magical genetics and biology, with the aim of proving various blood purist theories, including the idea that magic can be *stolen* from witches and wizards by Muggles.”

Harry felt like all of the air had vanished from his lungs. Ron’s face blanched, making his freckles stick out sharply against his ill complexion.

“The methods of research discussed are...vile,” said Lee, and he sounded like he was having trouble keeping his composure. “They’re so bad that I won’t discuss them in detail...but they are – to put it simply – different brands of torture. The files confirm the deaths of several witches and wizards in custody, including Bobby Fawley, Jack Douglas, Isabelle Kent, Robin Cornhill, Charles Alderson, Vicki Prouvaire, Castine Woods, Constance Caraway, John McGregor, Leila Rafiq, and two-year-old William Smith-Clearwater.”

Hermione’s hands flew to her mouth as she tried in vain to suppress a grief-filled gasp.

“They also, however, discuss other missing persons, who we can now confirm are still alive: Anjali Kapoor, Sean and Josh Winters, Yukiko Rei, Angelica Cole, Alan Godspeed, Donaghan

Tremlett, Tanner Van Burm, Hecate Oakham, Loretta Cornhill, Eleanor Bradstone, Garrick Newbourne, Tabitha Bainbridge, Bridget Jaheem – ”

Hermione gave a shocked, disbelieving scream. Ron shot to his feet and shoved himself forward so violently he nearly knocked the radio over.

“Did – did you *hear* that!?” Ron demanded of the others, his stunned white face almost terrified to smile.

“Yeah!” said Harry, his face bursting into a smile himself as he seized Ron’s shoulder and squeezed it tightly.

The three shot looks at each other, their faces perfectly bloodless but smiling in a kind of demented relief. After so many months of thinking her dead, the knowledge that Bridget was still alive was like a gut punch that somehow made them feel stronger and happier than they’d felt in ages.

“In her letter to us, Arjuna expressed hope that the intelligence she gathered would lead to the liberation of the Ward’s prisoners,” continued Lee. “Unfortunately, even after scouring the files for hours, the staff here at Potterwatch was unable to find any information about where the Ward or its captives are currently located. What we hope, however, is that the files’ contents being publicized will encourage others with ties to the Department of Mysteries to come forward and help us locate this disgusting prison.”

Lee paused again, and another rustle of parchment echoed in the background.

“...I wasn’t going to read the letter Arjuna wrote for you, faithful listeners,” he said in a hushed voice. “The instructions attached to it were that we only read it on air if she or another Abraxan had not contacted us within 24 hours. Despite this, I decided not to. But then, just before the broadcast, Royal informed me of two disappearances at the Ministry of Magic. The first is Eddie Carmichael, another contributor to our efforts here at Potterwatch...and the second is Rohan Belaji, who has now been labeled a wanted fugitive by the Auror Department for treason and theft of classified Ministry documents. Thanks to Arjuna’s letters we know her family is safe...but it’s fair to guess that the Ministry has realized that the files Arjuna sent us have gone missing, and they believe that Rohan might have some idea of where they are now.”

Harry glanced at Hermione and Ron. Hermione was watching Ron anxiously; Ron’s focus was solely on the radio, and his hands were clutching the edge of the table in a vice grip.

“To add to our concerns, Roger Davies, junior reporter of the *Daily Prophet* and another friend of

Potterwatch, has also gone missing. His wife Taylor Davies and their infant son are both safe in hiding, but Taylor has reported to us that the night her husband disappeared, he'd gone out to meet with Eddie Carmichael and Julien Montmercy. Julien Montmercy has returned to work without incident, but according to reports has been acting strangely. It's suspected that he may be under the Imperius Curse."

Hermione turned to Harry, her face full of horror.

"You – you don't think the Death Eaters used him, to hurt them?" she whispered.

The thought had crossed Harry's mind too, but he felt too nauseous to put it into words.

"I'll read this letter to you, listeners...out of service to a friend," Lee murmured. "We never met face-to-face – I never even knew her real name until now. But every time the Abraxans sent out a pamphlet she'd written, I always looked forward to reading it on-air, because I could share her optimism and resilience with all of you. Her words...gave strength to all of us here at Potterwatch...just as I'm sure they have for all of you. So for her sake, I'll read her letter...because she can't."

The terrible foreboding in Harry's chest seemed to grow. Ron and Hermione suddenly looked anxious – the insinuation of the words signaled several things, none of which were good, but they seemed desperate not to fancy any of them.

None of them spoke. Instead they waited for Lee to gather himself and speak again.

"... 'To those who defy the Dark Lord – if you hear this, then it's because the Death Eaters either inside or outside the Ministry have caught up with me, and I either am or will soon be dead.'"

Harry felt like his heart had stopped. No one in the tent moved.

"'But rather than imagine a grave or a body, I ask you to please imagine me writing this letter to you in the comfort of my bedroom at home, with the window wide open and the sunlight pouring in, as we once did before the War began.

"'When I was a child, my parents would read me the Tales of Beedle the Bard, and the one that I always loved the most was the Tale of the Three Brothers. From the time I was little, I always

connected with the Third Brother, being enamored with the idea of meeting and outsmarting Death himself, to the extent that he actually respected you as an equal and friend. I wanted to be that wise and that fearless. Now I face Death with some trepidation – will he look upon me with disdain or with a smile? Although I cannot know how Death will greet me, I do know that, like the Third Brother, I will pass on a precious gift to those I leave behind.

“To all of you, I give you my sincerest, unbreakable hope. The night is always darkest before the dawn, and although we don’t know how long this night will be, I am confident that the sun shall rise again. But like Helios, who it is said pulls the sun behind him with a horse-drawn chariot through the sky, we must help pull that sun back into place. We can’t stand idle. However much we must guard ourselves, we must also stand firm. We must not cower – we must not run – we must not shut out the world or our conscience. We must resist, even if it’s just in small ways. We must stay informed. We must hold our head high. We must tell jokes at our foe’s expense. We must offer a helping hand to the needy, whenever possible. We must hold onto our friendships and how they’ve changed us for the better, even if we’re separated by hundreds of miles or even by Death himself. Our spirits are intangible, resilient things – they’re only fragile if they can be caught long enough for our enemies to shatter them. To freeze and stay silent – to surrender all hope and give in to despair – is to condemn yourself to a living death, one far worse than true death. From death comes new life: numbness only begets more pain, and therefore more numbness.

“This I know like I know myself – as long as men can die, the idea of liberty is still viable...for monsters can be slain, survivors can prosper, and heroes can be transformed into icons. Remember Cedric Diggory – a noble, brave young man who in death has become a symbol of a lost future, destroyed in the prime of youth. Remember Mad-Eye Moody – a man who dedicated his life to eliminating evil however he could, even if evil ate away at him until nothing was left. Remember Millicent Bagnold – a woman who fought not only Death Eaters but her own prejudices to try to keep peace, only to be cut down in the attempt. Remember Cynthia and Owen Cauldwell – a mother and son who gave their lives to give hundreds of others a chance to live theirs. Remember Albus Dumbledore – the most powerful wizard of our age, who terrified the Dark Lord himself not with ruthless violence, but by being courageous and wise. Remember the feelings these figures instill in you, and for every one of us the Death Eaters cut down, five more will rise to take their place. It is these feelings – these warm, kind, heroic feelings – that, in the end, I believe will save us. To numb ourselves in this dire hour is to be complicit in the crimes perpetrated by our government, which has gone mad with the hatred and greed that can only come from the most vile of Death Eaters.

“ ‘As much as I’ve prayed this day wouldn’t come, I know that when I face Death, I’ll put forward my best smile and follow him without fear, looking toward my next life only with optimism...and although I pray you all will only face him when you are old and worn, I hope that if he greets you sooner than expected, you shall do the same.

“River and all those at Potterwatch, keep up your wonderful efforts – it has truly incalculable value to all who hear it. Ron, I hope you, Harry, and Hermione succeed in the task you’ve undertaken. Daphne, thank you for your scrapbooks – reading each entry has always kept me going. Bridget, please stay strong, wherever you are. Kevin, Colin, Cho, Rose, Hannah, and

Millicent, please be safe. Eddie, Roger, Julien, Marietta, all of my fellow Abraxans, know that you are all heroes in my eyes. Professor Flitwick, I lament that I never got to return to Hogwarts for your OWL class, but please know that I always dreamed of taking it on my darkest days. Professor McGonagall, Professor Sprout, Professor Trelawney, Professor Vector, Professor Sinistra, Professor Lupin, and Professor Binns, thank you for all of the wonderful things you've taught me. Professor Ramsay, I have so much to be sorry for, but also so much to be grateful for, and I hope you know how much you've inspired me. Stori...I shall cherish you forever, my dearest friend. You are the sister of my heart and soul, and I would not be who I am today without you.

“To my dear Mama and Papa, know that I love you. To my friends, I bequeath all of my strength. To everyone else, I merely implore you – please, don't let our fight end with us. If you loved us, our words, or our cause at all, draw your breath in pain to tell our story, to sing of hope, and to speak out against evil. If just one person stands up, then another can as well, and then another, and another, and another. It's incredible just how much difference one voice, and one life, can make.

“Arjuna Belaji...R.J. Moon.”

There was a long silence. Ron had brought an arm around Hermione and buried his face into the crook of her neck, but his shoulders shook with sobs despite the lack of sound. Hermione wept quietly into Ron's shoulder, her hand clutching at the front of his sweater.

Harry turned away, wiping the tears that streaked from his eyes off of his face with one hand that then ran down his face to cover his mouth.

It was incredible. In her letter, Arjuna had spoken of heroic people and of the feelings of courage and love their memory could instill in others. Yet upon hearing her letter read aloud through the choked tears of Lee Jordan, the hero that stood out the most to Harry wasn't Moody, or Cedric, or even Dumbledore.

It was Arjuna herself.

Not long after Potterwatch concluded its broadcast, Gordon Ramsay, dressed in unassuming Muggle clothes, approached the quiet street that had been dictated in Arjuna's letter. He walked down to a vacant lot, staring up at the nothingness beyond, and reread the words Arjuna had written for him.

“If this thou do deny, let our hands part, neither entitled in the other’s heart.”

He looked up from the letter, to see a dark blue house with white trim appearing little by little out of the darkness. Once it had fully formed, Ramsay took a deep breath, returned the letter to the inside of his robes, and walked up to the front door.

As soon as Ramsay opened the door, there was a frantic rustle inside as if someone had abruptly shot to their feet and a rapid plodding against the floor of the next room.

“Arjuna?!”

Rohan Belaji burst into the entrance hall. At the sight of Ramsay, he froze, his face blanching. Chaaya appeared just behind him, looking less terrified but no less urgent as she whipped out her wand and pointed it at Ramsay.

“Easy...I’m a friend,” Ramsay said very quickly, holding up both hands. “I’m Gordon Ramsay – I taught your daughter Arjuna at school...” His sharp blue eyes rippled gravely. “...She told me your Secret, so I could come help you.”

Chaaya and Rohan’s eyes both widened.

“You’ve seen Arjuna!?” demanded Rohan, his voice very strained. “Where is she? Is she with you?”

Ramsay’s face fell significantly. He closed his eyes, trying to compose himself; then he opened them again, looking up at Rohan with the kindest look he could manage through his own sorrow.

“...I’m sorry, Mr. Belaji. Your daughter sent me a letter because she was afraid she wouldn’t be coming home. My Helpers and I have searched everywhere, spoken to everyone we could...but we haven’t been able to find her.”

Ramsay swallowed the painful lump that had cropped up in his throat.

“...I’m so sorry.”

Rohan took a shaky step back, his eyes very wide.

“No...”

He shook his head back and forth, tears welling up in his eyes. The moments dragged on, the silence throbbing in everyone’s ears. Rohan tried everything he could not to believe it – he *couldn’t* believe it – that his daughter was –

As he stared at Ramsay’s grim, grief-touched face, however, Rohan knew in his heart that it was true, and that same heart shattered under the weight of his acceptance. He crumpled in on himself, falling to his knees.

“AGGGHHHHHHH!”

His horrible, grief-filled scream was so heart-wrenching that it could have put a banshee to shame. Overwhelmed by her husband’s anguish as well as her own, Chaaya turned away, bringing both of her hands over her ears as she stared at the wall and tried desperately to fight back the shaking of her own shoulders.

Compassion rushing through him, Ramsay clenched his jaw, bent down, and brought his arms around the sobbing Rohan in an attempt to comfort him.

Arjuna had only ever seen her father cry once in her life, when she’d ended up in St. Mungo’s as a child. She never saw Ramsay sitting on the rug in the entrance hall with Rohan for the next hour, as the ex-professor tried in vain to console the heartbroken man.

With the arrival of March came the much-publicized wedding of *Daily Prophet* owner Uric Cuffe to the Senior Undersecretary’s heir, the Auror called Lydia Montmercy. Thanks to the profits he’d made through the *Prophet* and the many wedding gifts he’d received from Ministry employees and his own family, Cuffe could afford the very best and he intended to make an impression, from reserving a wedding venue at Bruce Castle to ordering his bride a set of custom-fitted white wedding robes embroidered with two hundred tiny freshwater pearls.

Over a hundred guests had arrived for the wedding, including about thirty Aurors and MASTIF agents who were assigned by Montmercy to serve as security. Not only did they have to ward off any Muggles who might come across or hear the proceedings, but Montmercy had a series of names he'd removed from the guest list upon learning that they'd "badgered" Julien about the whereabouts of Eddie Carmichael and Roger Davies.

Julien himself had been rather reserved during the whole of the proceedings, instead preferring to let his fiancé go hog wild in his stead. This behavior hadn't seemed too out of the ordinary for most of Julien's coworkers and acquaintances, though, as he was never a very extroverted person. Sadly thanks to Montmercy, none of the Aurors or Mastiffs who knew Julien well enough to know something was wrong were in any place to get close to the ceremony now.

As Cuffe's female cousins, who had been named bridesmaids, helped Julien into his low-cut, pearl-encrusted dress robes, they gabbed, giggled, and cooed lovingly over the fine needlework, finding nothing but charm in Julien's reserved, demure smile.

"Who knew Uric had such good taste in dresses?" laughed one.

"Oh come on, you *know* he didn't choose this," scorned another, and both girls giggled.

"Ooh, I'd *love* to wear a dress like this someday!" sighed the youngest of them, adjusting the flower crown in Julien's hair that anchored his veil. "We could have our wedding on the cliffs of Dover, right by the water, and fly away on our honeymoon by broomstick...!"

The giggling bridesmaids were so lost in their own innocent giddiness that they hadn't heard Julien's mother enter the room until she cleared her throat to announce her presence.

Antoinette Montmercy looked far less like Julien than her husband Etienne, but the way that Julien and Antoinette held themselves was nearly identical. Etienne had always been the sort to put a happy face on things and act a lot warmer than he actually was, but Antoinette, like Julien, had always been quieter and more calculating. She had a strong jaw line and a pointed chin, and although she had in years past worn her brown hair in an elegant pixie cut, she'd recently grown it out to pacify her husband. Unlike her son, who was of course dressed in white, and the bridesmaids who were dressed in light blue, Antoinette had garbed herself in crisp black dress robes that made her look oddly severe.

"Really, now," she said with a dewy smile, and all of the girls immediately hushed, "you all sound like a flock of twittering finches."

Her brown eyes flickered from Julien to the girls, and her smile, although closed, spread slightly into a smirk.

“Girls, would you please excuse Lydia and me for a moment? It’s not every day that a woman must give away her only child, after all.”

The bridesmaids, looking a little embarrassed, quickly nodded and filed out of the room. Once they’d left, Antoinette closed the door behind them and waited several long moments before turning around to face Julien. Her eyes trailed over his frame, lingering on the pearls sewn into his robes, but there was no hint of a smile on her face now.

“Quite extravagant robes, aren’t they?” she murmured absently.

Julien smiled. “They are, indeed. Uric really outdid himself.”

“Mm...”

Antoinette’s gaze flickered up to Julien’s face. She hesitated for a moment, clearly thinking something over carefully, before she came over to sit on the chaise longue set up just behind the triple mirrors Julien was standing in front of.

“I seem to recall, a long time ago, asking you what sort of wedding you’d want, if the right person ever came around,” said Antoinette quietly. “I remember when you said you wanted a costume party wedding, I thought it was silly, but...well, you were so enamored with the idea of wearing something other than wedding robes, and everyone else being able to wear whatever they wanted, too...”

Julien gave a strange, almost fake-sounding laugh. “Mother...that was a very long time ago. And besides, I think both Uric and Father would prefer a more *traditional* ceremony.”

Antoinette’s eyes narrowed slightly. “...I’m sure they would.”

Julien, despite his strange air of pleasantry, seemed to sense her discomfort. Lifting his skirts, he gracefully swept over to his mother’s side, taking her hand in both of his.

“This may be an arranged marriage, Mother,” said Julien, his ice blue eyes very gentle, “but Uric is a good man, and I know I’ll be happy. We’ll have a family of our own, and I’ll raise them as well as you’ve raised me.”

Antoinette’s eyes ran over Julien’s face, narrowing little by little every second. She brought up a hand and slowly ran her fingers through Julien’s slightly longer blond hair. Then, after a moment, she pursed her lips and yanked him forward, wrapping her arms around him and holding him tightly. Julien stiffened slightly, startled.

“...I don’t doubt...that any child you might have would be a very lucky one,” Antoinette murmured. “But I hope you know...that no matter what choices you make – no matter who you are, or who you love – ”

Her brown eyes were filling up with tears that she fiercely held back.

“...I will *always*...without exception, without condition...love you with all of my heart. Even though I can’t protect you anymore – even if you’re taken from me – you will *always* be my child...and you will always be my July gillyflower.”

Julien faltered in his mother’s arms.

“...July...gillyflower?”

His voice sounded uncertain for the first time. Antoinette’s brown eyes flashed, but she kept her voice level.

“Of course – don’t you remember the old rhyme I used to read you? ‘*Hot July brings cooling showers, apricots, and gillyflowers.*’ You always used to love that part.”

Julien forced a smile. “Ah yes – because of my birthday. I must have forgotten.”

Yet his expression seemed almost distant and distracted now – as if he was suddenly having trouble collecting his thoughts.

“It’s almost time,” he said quickly, pulling out of Antoinette’s arms and adjusting his veil as he turned to the door.

Antoinette’s brown eyes rippled with bitter disappointment as they drifted down to the ground. “Yes...I suppose it is.”

Despite her expression, she came up beside her son and placed a soft kiss to his temple.

“I’ll walk you to the top of the aisle.”

Once the guests were all seated, the wedding ceremony commenced in full. Uric Cuffe stood at the back of the hall, dressed in an elegant set of scarlet velvet dress robes embellished with intricate brocade and a crown of ivy in his disheveled brown curls, beside a short, bespectacled wizard who held a very old leather-bound book in his hands. One by one, the light-blue-dressed bridesmaids and groomsmen came up the aisle, as well as the mothers of the bride and groom. Then, at long last, came Julien, arm-in-arm with his father Etienne, who waved genially around at the people on either side of the aisle as he walked.

Julien’s face was oddly blank as he came down the aisle, his eyes barely focusing on anything past the veil drawn over his head. Noticing this, Etienne slightly raised his wand, which was resting on the inside of Julien’s arm where no one else could see it.

‘Smile,’ he thought almost sharply.

Julien obeyed, his face breaking into a sweet, cherubic smile that didn’t suit his features, and Etienne relaxed.

Etienne and Julien stopped at the back of the hall, and Etienne brought Uric and Julien’s hands together, cupping them both in his so as to formally pronounce his blessing. Then he joined Antoinette on the edge of the podium just behind Julien, nodding significantly to the tiny wizard between Uric and Julien. The wizard skipped forward, trailing golden swirls from his wand around Uric and Julien’s joined hands like sparkling, transparent ribbon.

“Now you are bound, one to the other,” the little man recited brightly, “with a tie not easy to break! Take the time of binding before the final vows are made – ”

In Julien’s ears, however, the words of the ceremony were but a murmur from far off, like something out of a dream – for you see, although he had spoken readily and gone about his usual days as ever, his mind was never really in any of them. Everything in his consciousness was still blurred around the edges, with only snippets of conversation and visuals coming through. It felt like a strange mixture of dream and hallucination, but his mind had been too disoriented and relaxed to question it.

Or at least, it *had* been...until the sensation of an unfamiliar set of lips covered his own. The lips felt chapped, rough – and the breath of the lips’ owner – *ugh!* Julien felt a strange twinge of illness that he couldn’t explain, even as the lips released his and the peaceful dreaminess returned.

The sensation, however fragmented and strange it felt, made Julien’s brain twitch. He’d never had a dream that felt like *that* before – what sort of strange dream was this? And how long exactly had it been going on? Shouldn’t the clock in his room have woken him up by now, so he could go to work – ?

‘*Smile,*’ the oddly familiar voice that had frequented the dream commanded him.

Julien obeyed, but his mind was still whirling. Why was he smiling? He didn’t *feel* like smiling. Something felt strange –

‘*Take his hand,*’ said the voice.

Julien did so, but with more reluctance. Whose hand was he taking? Why was he taking it?

“ – *extended honeymoon,*” another voice suddenly echoed over Julien’s consciousness, from somewhere far away. “*I’ve taken the next few months off – I figure we can return around July, in time for Lydia’s birthday – ”*

Julien stiffened sharply.

July – his birthday –

“Read my lines, Mother!” a blond-haired toddler ordered playfully. “Read mine!”

Antoinette chuckled fondly. “‘Hot July brings cooling showers, apricots, and gillyflowers’ ...”

“That’s me,” the toddler said smugly.

Antoinette squeezed her giggling child close, ruffling up his long blond hair.

“Yes, that’s you – my sweet July gillyflower.”

Antoinette, only partially awake, gave a start at the sight of the sitting room. It had been transformed into a gorgeous indoor garden, full of beautiful white and purple gillyflowers – and standing in the center of the foliage, dressed in high-necked black robes trimmed with peacock feathers, was her fourteen-year-old child.

“Happy Mother’s Day,” he said with a soft smile.

“‘Julien?’” asked Hector Summerby, raising a curious eyebrow.

“Derivative of ‘July,’” Julien said with a slight shrug. “Mother used to call me her July gillyflower, you see – couldn’t find a name I liked about the flower, but at least I can reference the first part.”

“...No matter what choices you make,” Antoinette whispered, “no matter who you are, or who you love...I will always...without exception, without condition...love you with all of my heart. Even though I can’t protect you anymore – even if you’re taken from me – you will always be my child... and you will always be my July gillyflower.”

That last memory – Julien didn’t remember *hearing* those words before. When had his mother said that? Why didn’t he know when she’d said that? It almost sounded like – like she *knew* – like she didn’t care that he was –

‘*Smile,*’ the voice commanded again.

But Julien was too distracted to obey. The thought of his mother knowing – of her *accepting* him, regardless of how his father reacted – it was overwhelming in the best possible way. It filled Julien up with so much strength and love that he felt close to tears.

‘*Smile!*’ the voice repeated, sounding sharper now.

But Julien barely heard the voice anymore. He was too lost in his own thoughts.

His mother *accepted* him – she *accepted* him – not like –

Roger whirled on Montmercy with ferocity.

“How could you?!” he roared, his blue eyes flaring. “He’s your son!”

“She is my daughter!” Montmercy snarled furiously. “And I will do anything I have to in order to protect her from criminal, Muggle-loving delinquents like you!”

Julien felt a terrible chill down his spine. He didn't remember *that* memory either – when did his father *say* that – ?!

'I said SMILE!' the voice ordered fiercely.

And all at once, Julien realized whom the voice belonged to. In a flare of uncontrollable panic, he lashed out his arm, colliding it with something that had apparently been on his right-hand side, and collapsed to the ground.

“Lydia?”

“Lydia?”

Julien clutched his head, blinking rapidly to clear his vision.

Just below him was a beautifully polished marble floor. As he straightened up, looking around, he found himself in a hall full of well-dressed witches and wizards, all staring at him in concern. Huddled up on the ground to his left was Uric Cuffe, who was crying and whimpering in pain as he clutched his jaw. Standing just in front of him were Mafalda Hopkirk and another older witch Julien recognized from the Improper Use of Magic Office, who both looked very surprised and worried.

“Mrs. Cuffe, are you all right?” Mafalda asked gently.

The title made Julien's stomach lurch.

“What...did you call me...?”

His head shot around to stare at Cuffe on the ground, taking in his scarlet brocaded robes. Then he looked down at himself, his eyes widening in horror at his own white ensemble.

Cuffe stumbled to his feet, still whimpering pitifully, as he gave Julien his best “concerned

husband” face.

“Lydia – Lydia, whatever is the matter?”

The weasel-like man brought a hand up to caress Julien’s cheek. The contact filled Julien with so much disgust that he shoved Cuffe back, visibly horrorstruck.

“No – no – ”

He whirled around, his ice blue eyes very wide and terrified.

It was his and Cuffe’s wedding – he was *married* to Uric Cuffe – he’d actually *allowed* himself to be married to –

His and Cuffe’s wedding had been scheduled for March. It was *March. It was March*, when just moments ago it was the end of February – when just moments ago, Julien had gone to meet Eddie and Roger at Royal Holloway – then they and Julien had run into Arjuna – then the Death Eaters arrived, and Arjuna was captured by –

Julien’s face blanched, making him appear almost ghost-like to the assembled guests, who tried once again to approach him.

“Lydia?”

“Mrs. Cuffe, what’s wrong?”

Julien looked around at the assembled guests, before his eyes landed on Etienne and Antoinette Montmercy, who had both run over in response to the commotion. Montmercy looked almost as terrified as Julien, but he tried to hide it, putting forward as grounded and paternal of an air as he could manage.

“Lydia – ”

Julien's ice blue eyes widened upon his father, the pupils becoming slits of rage as he lunged forward, whipping out his wand.

BANG!

In an instant Montmercy was blasted clean off his feet and across the room, his back colliding with the far wall. The spectators all gasped and screamed in fear as Julien lashed his wand at the air, hoisting Montmercy up by the back of his robes as if they'd been snatched by some invisible floating hand.

"YOU KILLED THEM!" Julien roared, his ice blue eyes blazing and welling up with tears of fury and pain. "*YOU KILLED THEM!*"

The Aurors who had been assigned as security came running, but Julien was so full of out-of-control wrath that he wordlessly disarmed each of them as they approached, before hurtling his father back-first into a marble swan statue set up in the corner, which shattered under his weight.

"AFTER I TOLD YOU THAT I WOULD FACE THE SAME FATE AS THEM – AFTER I *PLEADED* FOR THEIR LIVES, YOU FED THEM TO YOUR GOONS LIKE PIGS FOR SLAUGHTER! *YOU MONSTER, YOU KILLED THEM!*"

Montmercy raised his own wand in a vain attempt to counter Julien's spell, but Julien wordlessly disarmed him and slammed him roughly into the floor.

"SHE WAS *SIXTEEN!*" he screamed, as tears streamed from his insane, hate-filled eyes. "HE HAD A *SON!* HE WAS GOING TO BE HEAD OF THE AUROR DEPARTMENT ONE DAY, AND YOU *KILLED THEM, YOU –*"

"*No!*" shouted Antoinette.

Before Julien could turn around in response to his mother's cry, however, Antonin Dolohov had come up behind Julien and wordlessly Stunned him. Julien froze; then, his wand arm slackening at his side, he collapsed in an unconscious heap.

Montmercy landed on the ground with a *flump*, released from Julien's spell. Antoinette ran past her husband as if to join Julien's side, but was stopped by Dolohov, who stepped between them.

“Bind her,” Dolohov said over his shoulder to two of his subordinates.

The two Aurors hesitantly reclaimed their wands and then went about binding Julien in string-like white bonds. Antoinette’s face blanched with fear.

“No – no, please don’t – !”

Antoinette whirled on Montmercy, her face desperate.

“Etienne – Etienne, don’t let them – !”

Montmercy didn’t look at his wife: he seemed too stunned. His eyes were locked on the unconscious Julien, the uninjured remnants of his bruised face looking as white as a sheet.

“Now, Mrs. Montmercy, there’s no need to fret,” Dolohov said sharply, his eyes narrowing hatefully on Julien’s prone head. “It seems clear to me that the girl has merely been victim to a particularly vindictive Confundus Charm.”

“*Confundus Charm...*?” Antoinette whispered in horrified disbelief.

“Of course,” said Dolohov. “After all, from what I know of the young lady, this behavior is certainly not normal...wouldn’t you say so, Etienne?”

Montmercy’s eyes narrowed upon the top of Julien’s head, before he looked away.

“No,” he said coldly. “Lydia has *never* behaved so violently before. The only person I can think of who might have influenced her so badly is that rogue Auror, Edward Carmichael...”

The name fell from Montmercy’s lips like venom.

“Perhaps *he*’s the source of her behavior, then,” said Dolohov smoothly.

Cuffe, who had been quiet up until this point, hurriedly ran over. He rather forwardly pushed the Aurors off of Julien, cradling Julien in his arms as if the Slytherin Auror were some family house cat being carried awkwardly around by some bratty child.

“I’ll take her home, sir,” said Cuffe, his voice attempting compassion but instead coming across as rather ostentatious. “I may be no great Healer...but surely my love will be of some help to her wounds.”

A handful of the wedding guests exchanged uncomfortable looks as Cuffe stroked Julien’s hair. Even Dolohov looked thoroughly unimpressed by the display, instead looking down on Cuffe with great condescension.

“Forgive me, Mr. Cuffe, but romantic odes are not enough to convince me that your bride won’t act out in the future. She’ll need *proper* treatment.”

He trailed a hand through his dark beard as he glanced out the side of his eye at Montmercy.

“St. Mungo’s is not the best equipped for mental health...but I have a contact who might be of use in such a matter. I’ll escort her to the ward forthwith.”

He snapped his fingers, and a certain Auror – a gaunt young man with dark hair and bangs and with sunken-in eyes that made him look like a skull – dashed forward. Without skipping a beat, the skull-eyed Auror silently swept down on Julien and Cuffe; Cuffe tried to resist his attempts to take Julien, but the Auror shot a curse into Cuffe’s eyes that made him cry out and clutch his face in pain, which allowed the skull-eyed man to take Julien without further effort.

Her face full of terror, Antoinette grabbed Montmercy’s arm.

“Etienne, please – we can take Lydia home! We can have a Mediwizard come to our house, treat her there – you *can’t* – ”

Montmercy didn’t reply. His eyes stayed on Dolohov as he snatched up one of Julien’s arms, while his subordinate held the other.

“Etienne, *please*, don’t do this!” pleaded Antoinette, her voice growing more strained. “Don’t let them take her away! She’s our daughter, our *child*! Don’t let them take her – don’t let them take

my baby – ”

No matter how Antoinette pleaded or how roughly she pulled at her husband's arms and robes, however, Montmercy did not look her in the face. Instead he merely watched Dolohov, Julien, and the skull-eyed Auror leave, his eyes rippling with pain and anger as he stared at his child's tear-streaked, unconscious face.

Antoinette got right up in his face, grabbing the front of his robes and shaking him.

“Etienne!”

The single word sounded like a heart being ripped in two. Instead of showing any compassion, however, Montmercy merely seized her wrists and twisted them off of him with such force that Antoinette flinched in pain.

“Lydia is very sick, my love,” Montmercy said very quietly, his ice blue eyes as blank and cold as a china doll's, “sicker, I fear, than either you or I have any power in healing.”

Montmercy leaned forward, placing his forehead beside Antoinette's. She flinched at the contact, her brown eyes shooting to the ground so she wouldn't have to look into those cold eyes any further.

“Don't be afraid, dearest,” murmured Montmercy. “I would trust Antonin with my life.”

“It's not *your* life I'm worried about,” Antoinette spat back before she could stop herself.

Montmercy's eyes flashed, a bizarre mixture of fear and rage flaring within their depths, as he moved even closer to his wife, pressing himself into the crevices of her body and breathing against her lips.

“I only want what's best for Lydia. You should have nothing to fear, if you want the same...and remember, I will keep Lydia away from anyone who *doesn't*.”

Antoinette's eyes narrowed upon her husband's Adam's apple. She felt too nauseous and scared to look up at his face.

Taking Antoinette's silence as the acceptance he desired, Montmercy took a step back, offering an expression that attempted warmth and reassurance but was undercut by the blank, empty look in his eyes.

"Don't worry. Our daughter may be broken, but not beyond repair. With enough hard work...*anything* can be fixed."

"We're Alive"

March 6, 1998

Hi guys...it's been a while since anyone's written anything, so I thought I'd just write something down really quick before I go to work.

Everything's going well here, for the most part. I'm all right, and so are Amanda, Lalo, Mum, and Dad. Amanda and Lalo have both been pulling late hours for rehearsals, as The Wizard of Oz opens in just under two months now. Of course both of them are only understudies, but they're still expected to be able to jump into the main roles if need be, so they have to pull out all the stops.

At work everything's pretty normal, I guess. Without Amanda and Lalo around as much, I've tried talking to some of my coworkers more, but many of them are from out of state and just commute to the Ministry via Floo Powder. The United States is so much more crowded than the U.K. (New York City, especially, compared to London) that it's very difficult for most of the wizards and witches who work at the American Ministry to live close to the city, so the people who work in my department have to commute from New Jersey, Massachusetts, or in one case even Virginia. Needless to say, it's a little harder to invite someone out to the coffee shop up the street when the person doesn't live anywhere close to that street! That doesn't even touch on how much I wish I could talk to someone about everything going on back home, but can't...

Everyone, I realize that I'm in no place to say this, when I'm a bird looking at a locked cage from the outside, but...I feel so alone right now. I know I'm not, but knowing that all of you are in so much danger – danger to the point that some of you might not even come home tomorrow – and I'm so powerless that I can't even talk about what's happening is breaking my heart. I wish I could swoop down on all of you and carry you away somewhere safe, somewhere far away from all of this, but I know that wish is selfish and I know it doesn't help anything. Just...please, please write and tell me you're all right. Please write something happy, something hopeful, even if it's just that you're okay.

I love you all so much. Please never forget that, no matter what.

Love,

Cho

Oh, Cho...please don't take all of this on yourself. We've all felt terrible, and rightly so, but you have every right to feel sad! I mean, it can't be easy, having to keep so many secrets from the people you've befriended in America...

Don't worry about me: I'm all right. It's still quiet here in the Room of Requirement. Ernie and

Lavender Brown joined us two days ago, after Lavender finally stood up to Alecko and Ernie tried to protect her from punishment. As wrong as it is for me to think it, I'm really glad to see Ernie.

Earlier today Neville got the idea of us writing letters for Arjuna and sending them into Potterwatch, so that they could be read during the next broadcast. I've been somewhat at a loss of where to start, but I know it'll help, once I finally let it out.

I know the world is bleak, but a single bright star can lighten even the darkest night. Please don't give up!

Love,

Hannah

I'm all right too! Noel and Trudy have been really nice lately: Noel's kept me company a lot of the day, and last night when I wasn't feeling up for dinner, Trudy brought me a mug of hot chocolate before bed. Pogo, Mr. Whiskers, and Darcy have been a help too – for the last week, they decided to all swarm around me whenever I come into the living room, with Pogo sitting by my feet, Darcy taking over my lap, and Mr. Whiskers curling up on my shoulders. It's been nice to have them close by.

I miss you all so much...please stay safe.

xoxoxo

Rose

We're all right.

Harry, Hermione and I have moved on to another campsite. Won't say where for safety, but there's a killer sunset here right now. Hermione says that a red sunset is supposed to be a good omen – I sure hope that's true.

Keep fighting, everyone!

Ron

We're all right, too. Kevin's kept a happy face on for the most part, but it still helps to have him around. The other night he and I left the house together and sat down on the swings at the playground by our house, talking for a long while. It wasn't all happy, but it made us both feel better, I think.

I found these pictures of Arjuna in my photo album yesterday. I know it's sort of sad seeing her face, but...oh, just look at how happy she is in the kitchen! I'll still never forget how happy I was, learning how to chop and mince food with magic from her! At the beginning we all thought she was kind of stuck-up, but even then, she loved cooking so much. She really was amazing...

We all really miss you. Stay strong!

Later,

Colin

It had been raining outside Hogwarts castle for almost a week. The gray atmosphere outside echoed the lifeless, dreary air inside – even the older students, who had known school years happier than this one, had been worn down by the endless parade of intimidation and suppression exerted by the Carrows. Just about everyone who felt the urge to resist had gone underground. Even Dumbledore's Army was clearly a shell of its former self, as so many of its members had to have gone into hiding. The remnants of the student resistance tried as hard as they could to stay strong, but with the news from outside being no more reassuring than what they saw at school, hope was proving difficult to cultivate.

Astoria awoke Saturday morning to the sensation of something pulling at her hair. Blinking awake slowly, she looked up to find her Eagle owl, Wagtail, was perched at the top of her bed, picking up strands of her hair and tugging them lightly with his beak.

"Wagtail," she groaned sleepily, "you're supposed to be in the owlery, you stupid bird..."

Wagtail chirped brightly, his pumpkin-colored eyes narrowing almost smugly. Despite how tired she was, Astoria was smiling from ear to ear as she sat up.

“You don’t have any mail,” she mumbled. “Were you lonely too, then?”

Wagtail nipped at her hair affectionately, and she smiled a little more softly. Wagtail had always had a good sense of his owner’s emotional state – he’d already taken to flying into Astoria’s dorm room and making her take him back to the owlery in his own strange attempt to cheer her up a lot this last year, and with what had happened...

Astoria’s light blue eyes dimmed slightly as she trailed a hand along Wagtail’s neck, stroking his feathers.

“Thanks, Waggles,” she said very quietly.

Brushing her hair out of her eyes, she pulled aside her sapphire blue bed curtains, got out of bed, and took some casual robes and a gray jumper out of her dresser so she could lay them flat on top.

“Better get dressed and take you back to the owlery where you belong,” she said lightly.

Wagtail gave a displeased shriek that sounded like the tantrum of some bratty child. Biting her lip to fight back a laugh, Astoria shook her head amusedly.

“Oh, all right – breakfast and *then* back to the owlery. Fair?”

Wagtail didn’t respond – he’d already distracted himself by preening his wing feathers.

About fifteen minutes later, Astoria started the long trek down the stairs away from Ravenclaw Tower, Wagtail on her left shoulder. The grayish-white owl kept turning his head around in circles, looking around beadily at everyone else in the hallways and occasionally snapping his beak. Astoria kept trying to soothe him, stroking his front plumage absently, but the bird seemed oddly on-edge.

It was as Astoria rounded the corner and approached the top of the stairs that led to the Great Hall when she suddenly heard it.

“GYAAAAH!”

Astoria stiffened in horror. It sounded like a child screaming – an underclassman –

Her heart pounding in her chest, she dashed down the hall, one hand remaining on Wagtail to keep him anchored to her shoulder, and stopped at the top of the staircase, staring at the scene below.

Alecto Carrow was using the Cruciatus Curse on the Ravenclaw first year boy that Astoria knew was called Gamp. The dark-skinned, freckled boy was hunched in on himself, quaking and crying in pain. Surrounding the two was a growing crowd of students, which was kept back by Amycus, who had his wand brandished lackadaisically at them as he smugly watched his sister interrogate the tiny boy.

“Tell me who taught it t’ you!” yelled Alecto.

The tiny freckled boy was trembling all over, pain and terror paralyzing him and making his knees knock.

“N-no one!” he choked.

“*LIAR! Crucio!*”

Gamp fell in on himself again with a scream. Astoria watched in horror, her face going very white, as Wagtail gave a low, groan-like shriek.

“You produced a *fully formed Shield Charm!*” Alecto said fiercely. “No first year would know magic that advanced unless they had help! Now tell me *who helped you!*”

“*No one!*” Gamp cried more desperately, tears streaking down his face. “No one, I *swear* it was no one! I read it in a book – *Standard Book of Spells, Grade Five* – !”

But Alecto wasn't hearing it.

“*Crucio! Crucio! Crucio!*”

Gamp's screams bounced off the walls, making all of the student observers flinch in on themselves in revulsion and anguish. Unable to bear it any longer, Astoria barreled down the stairs.

“Professor Carrow!”

Because she'd come from the opposite side of the crowd, Amycus was unable to reach Astoria before she'd run up in front of the tiny first year, throwing her arms out protectively. Wagtail similarly fluffed out his feathers, making himself appear bigger on Astoria's shoulder as he shrieked at Alecto.

Alecto's light blue eyes flashed.

“Well, well, if it isn't our wittle cousin Astoria! Interfering with my interrogation? Naughty, naughty – what would *Theia* say...?”

“It can't *be* an interrogation if you're not getting any new information!” Astoria argued, her voice shaking with righteous anger as well as some fear that she tried to hide. “If he's not changing his answer after that many curses, then he clearly doesn't have anything else to *say!*”

At that moment Daphne, Millicent, and Pansy Parkinson appeared, having just arrived up the stairs that led to the Slytherin dungeons. At the sight of her younger sister standing in front of Alecto, Daphne ran forward, her face white with terror, but Amycus seized her by the arm first.

“Ah, ah, ah, Daphne dear,” he cooed cruelly at her, “don't interrupt Alecto while she's working.”

“*I* will determine when a student is telling the truth or not, little cousin,” said Alecto coolly. “Now step aside before I decide t' *make* you.”

Astoria caught sight of Daphne's pleading look, and her resolve faltered slightly. Her father had *pleaded* with her to keep her head down – Daphne had told her to be safe – even Draco, as terrible as he was, had been right about how much Astoria's behavior could potentially endanger Daphne...

Astoria glanced back at the first year boy on the floor, her face full of conflict. She didn't want to just leave him unprotected – but if she didn't, wouldn't that then endanger not only herself, but her family too?

It was that flicker in Astoria's resolve that made a tiny Ravenclaw girl push to the front of the crowd.

“IT WAS HER!”

Everyone froze. The tiny girl with blond pigtails who Astoria knew was Gamp's best friend was pointing a shaky finger up at her, her face very white.

“She taught us the Shield Charm!” she squeaked, her voice trembling.

“Mackenzie – ” her twin brother tried to whisper in her ear, but she was too petrified to hear him.

“She told us to keep it a secret so we wouldn't get caught – we used to meet in the old Muggle Studies teacher's office, on the eighth floor – ”

“Mackenzie, *no!*” whimpered Gamp.

Mackenzie looked at her friend crumpled up on the floor, her white face suddenly overcome with guilt and shame. Her eyes flooding with tears, Mackenzie looked up at Alecto, desperation scrawled over her entire body as she wrung her hands in front of her.

Alecto's eyes swiveled around to Astoria, who stared back with as stoic of an expression as she could manage despite her trembling hands at her sides.

“So,” Alecto said coldly, “seems you don't just *sympathize* with troublemakers, you also aid and

abet them...”

Daphne tried to rush forward again, but Amycus yanked her roughly backward by the arm.

“Professor Carrow, please,” Daphne said urgently, “Astoria meant no harm! Uncle Hyperion always told us to pass on what we’ve learned, when approached for help; she must’ve – ”

“I frankly don’t care what old *Hyper-yawn* says – *I’m* a teacher at this school, not him,” Alecto snapped. “And I’ve been more than clear that I don’t want any students *playacting* as teachers. It seems, however, that my detentions have not gotten the point across...”

Her eyes narrowed upon Astoria like she was some smug, hungry wolf.

“...So, it seems, I’ll just have t’ show you all what happens t’ students who contradict their teachers.”

Alecto raised her wand, pointing it right between Astoria’s eyes.

“*Crucio!*”

Astoria had never felt the Cruciatus Curse before that moment. That entire year she’d kept her head down, just as her father had said, and she’d been able to circumvent it. Now that she felt it, she understood why it was called “*Unforgivable*.” She suddenly felt like she was being stabbed with a thousand needles from all sides that punctured her skin with such ferocity that she surely had to be bleeding from every pore.

She felt her knees give way. Her bag came off her shoulder and collided with the ground. Somewhere far away, she heard someone crying her name, and then a terrible, horrible scream – it almost sounded like herself, but – *no*, surely – *surely* she couldn’t make a sound like that – it had to be some wounded animal – it couldn’t *possibly* be human –

“AAAARGH!”

All of a sudden the relentless, stabbing pain disappeared. Astoria slouched forward, gasping for

breath, as she looked up from the ground covered in her schoolbooks and pieces of loose parchment.

Wagtail the owl had leapt off her shoulder and descended on Alecto, clawing and snapping at every bit of her he could reach. He shrieked like a vengeful banshee as his claws slashed at her face, making her cry out in pain and fury.

“You mangy – *AVADA KEDAVRA!*”

A flash of green light slammed into Wagtail, smacking him away from Alecto like a bat hitting a baseball and callously tossing him to the floor in a heap.

Astoria stared, her eyes wide and hollow, at her beloved pet on the ground. Then, her heart ricocheting in her chest, she scrambled haphazardly to her feet and ran to him.

‘No – no – ’

She quickly scooped him up. His small, feathery body lay limp in her arms, heavy with unnatural gravity that made him feel like he’d been turned to stone. He wasn’t moving – there was no response, no warmth or breath or life. Even his orange eyes, always so alert, had gone dark, stuck between being not quite open and not quite closed.

There was...*nothing*...

Astoria felt like she’d been struck dumb, her voice gasping and choking in her throat. Somewhere far behind her, Alecto laughed raucously.

“Aw, Amycus, will you look at *that*? She can’t even *speak* – ”

Amycus sniggered. “Aww, baby Stori miss her wittle birdie?”

Their laughter rang out even louder, ringing painfully in Astoria’s ears. Astoria felt as if she was going blind – her eyes were breaking into pieces – tears? *No* – she *couldn’t* cry – not in front of the Carrows –

But she couldn't do it. No matter how hard she tried to suppress the bubbling feeling in the back of her throat, her tears just kept coming. Trying to hold it back was suffocating.

Millicent took a step forward, her brown eyes and mouth wide with shock and anger, but Pansy grabbed hold of her shoulder.

"What are you doing?" she hissed. "You want to get *Crucio* to the face too?"

Millicent stared at Pansy. Her expression was blank, but it was only because she was unable to conjure up a proper response. In a weird way, Pansy was right – there was no way she could defeat both Amycus and Alecto magically speaking, and even if she tried punching her way through, it would likely only escalate the situation and put everyone in even more danger. Frustration and pain coursed through Millicent's veins, making her clench her fists and close her eyes tight.

Daphne, who was still pulling against Amycus's grip desperately, whirled on him, her face very pale but her expression clearly desperate.

"Professor, please, that's *enough*! Let her go!"

Amycus's gaze shot down to her, his ice blue eyes flashing.

"Now is *that* any way t' talk t' yer betrothed, Daphne m'dear?" he asked coolly.

Daphne flinched, her dark eyes rippling with fear despite the chilly mask she tried to put back on. Not fooled by Daphne's attempt at stoicism, Alecto raised her wand again.

"I can tell you take more after yer father, little Daphne," she said softly. "Punish you, and I'd only make you angry. But punish someone *else*...and you'll shut yer trap."

Daphne's eyes widened as Alecto walked back around, coming up on Astoria from behind.

"*No* – !" she cried.

“*Crucio!*”

Still clutching her beloved pet in her arms, Astoria hunched over, screaming in pain in response to Alecto’s curse. Tears streamed down her face, but she barely felt them as the invisible knives barraged her from all sides, making her shrivel up on the ground.

“*Crucio! CRUCIO!*”

Alecto cast the spell once – twice – three times – she cast it over and over, lashing out at Astoria with a kind of venom the students had never seen before. Millicent had shut her eyes and clenched her teeth, trying desperately to block out Astoria’s screams and fight back her own tears of fury and frustration. Pansy had brought her hands over her ears, turning away as if wanting to pretend nothing was happening. Mackenzie was sobbing openly in her brother’s arms, having realized what a horrible mistake she’d made. But no one was more distraught than Daphne as she fought against Amycus’s vice grip, kicking and pulling and screaming through her tears.

“*ALECTO, STOP! STOP, PLEASE! PLEASE! NO! NO! ASTORIAAAA!*”

Millicent suddenly felt someone brushing roughly past her as he climbed the stairs that led out of the Slytherin dungeons, pushing his way through the crowd.

“Professors!” said Draco sharply. “Hannah Abbott was spotted upstairs in the sixth floor corridor – it looks like Anthony Goldstein and Lavender Brown might be with her.”

Alecto abruptly straightened up like a startled cat, releasing her hold on Astoria and letting the younger girl collapse to the ground.

“*Excellent, Draco!*” she said with a kind of wicked delight. “Come, Amycus – Draco, lead the way!”

Amycus dropped Daphne’s arms and followed Alecto as she retreated up the stairs after Draco, leaving Gamp and Astoria forgotten.

Daphne immediately dashed over to her younger sister’s side, wrapping both of her arms around

her.

“Astoria...”

Astoria trembled in Daphne’s arms. Her light blue eyes were very wide and blank as they stared at the floor. Her cheeks were already wet with tears, but as soon as Daphne embraced her, Astoria’s eyes flooded again, and more tears streaked down her face as she quaked with sobs.

Her lip trembling as she fought back her own tears, Daphne squeezed Astoria tightly, as if trying to envelop her like a bat wrapping its wings around itself. The surrounding students all stared at the two, looking stunned and speechless with horror and dismay. Then Pansy, her eyes flickering from the silent crowd to her distraught best friend, separated herself from the crowd and faced them with a fearsome expression.

“Well, go on, then! Get!”

Taken aback by her sharpness, the other students glowered at her, before reluctantly peeling off from the mass and dispersing. The two Ravenclaw twins dashed over to Gamp, helping him to his feet. Rather than being scared away, however, they faced the two Greengrass sisters.

“I’m – ” Gamp choked quietly, “I’m so – ”

Daphne glowered up at him through her tears.

“I don’t blame you,” she said very coldly. “I don’t even blame your friend for trying to protect you. I know you didn’t know what would happen...”

Her dark eyes hardened like some sort of heartless, flawless black diamond as her voice filled with a venom that could put Alecto to shame.

“...But I don’t want to see your faces or hear your voices ever again. Now get out.”

The three first years huddled together, their eyes filled with tears and shame, before they sidled away slowly up the stairs.

Millicent bent down next to Daphne and started stuffing books back into Astoria's schoolbag. Then she hoisted the bag onto her shoulder and helped Daphne lift Astoria up onto her feet.

Pansy, still looking very uncomfortable about the whole thing, kept her eyes on the Great Hall as she spoke over her shoulder to Daphne.

"...You'll be taking her to the Hospital Wing, then?"

Daphne glanced down at Astoria and the feathery corpse of Wagtail and swallowed.

"Yes," she said quietly.

Pansy sighed. "All right...but you'll owe me, for copying notes for you. Shame about the feast, but I suppose the house elves could bring something up for you. And you'll be back later, so I'll see you then."

Despite the discomfort and forceful bluntness to her tone, Daphne was surprised that Pansy managed to squeeze out some genuine sentiment. Yes, of course she didn't really care about Astoria – after all, Pansy had no interest in straying outside the Carrows' rules, let alone the new regime at the Ministry – but she knew that Daphne cared about Astoria, and Daphne was her friend...and even if Pansy wasn't really friend material in any way, she appreciated Daphne's friendship enough that she put in some effort, even if it wasn't much.

Daphne bowed her head, her pride preventing her from fully articulating the half-hearted gratitude she felt. Instead all she said was,

"See you later."

Without another word Daphne and Millicent carried Astoria away up the hall.

March 7, 1998

We're alive.

Will write more later.

Daphne

Madame Pomfrey had allowed Millicent and Daphne to sit with Astoria for the rest of the day, but when curfew came, she'd instructed them both to return to their dormitory so Astoria could rest. Daphne looked very reluctant to leave her sister's side and only obeyed the nurse's wishes with the assurance that she could come visit her again first thing the next morning.

Once Madame Pomfrey had gone to bed, Astoria was left alone in the Hospital Wing. The only light permeating the darkened space was the silvery moonlight, which came in through the windows in ethereal stripes. All was quiet, until a strange scuffle caught Astoria's ear.

Her body still weak and shuddering with ghostly flickers of pain, the fifth year Ravenclaw tried to sit up. She listened carefully, her light blue eyes squinting through the darkness. There was something there – some sort of a white blur –

Out of the darkness leapt a white Angora cat, who landed deftly on the foot of Astoria's bed. In his mouth was a piece of rolled-up parchment.

Astoria stared at the cat. Then, in the blink of an eye, the cat had transformed into a pale, gray-eyed wizard dressed in black robes and holding a parchment roll in his mouth.

"*Malfoy?*" said Astoria, her voice taken aback but far too raspy and weak to be anything but a whisper.

Draco spat the roll of parchment into his hand quickly.

"*Shh,*" he quieted her. "Don't panic. I'm just here to give this back."

He unrolled the parchment and put it down on the side table – it was an essay Astoria had been writing for Transfiguration.

“I found it in the corridor by the Great Hall,” Draco added in half-hearted explanation. “It must’ve gone flying, when you...dropped your bag.”

He glanced away. When he turned his head, Astoria noticed a set of vicious red gashes trailing along the side of his neck, just underneath his collar. She stared at him, her eyes narrowed critically.

“...Why did you do that?” she said softly.

Draco snorted. “Well, it’s *your* essay, isn’t it? No point in me keeping it, I’ve already written one just like it – ”

“No,” Astoria interrupted him a little more harshly, though her voice was much too raspy to gain much volume. “I mean, why did you lie like that?”

Draco raised his eyebrows in a vain attempt at innocence.

“Millicent said you came up the same staircase she, Daphne, and Pansy had just come from,” Astoria challenged him. “You *couldn’t* have seen Hannah upstairs, because you weren’t upstairs at all. And you must’ve known that lying to Alecto and Amycus’s faces would make them punish you too – that’s what those slashes are, aren’t they? So why?”

Draco considered Astoria for a moment. His stormy gray eyes were almost frustratingly unreadable.

“...I don’t know,” he said at last. “Guess I just didn’t like seeing you getting tortured.”

Astoria looked down at her sheets. “So you pitied me?”

“It’s not pity.”

She looked up at him. Amazingly he looked almost as startled as her, hearing her own words coming out of his mouth – then his lips curled up in a strange, sad smile.

“...I don’t know what it is, exactly...but it’s not pity. Pity makes you give someone something you have no problem giving away – you know, like giving up a toy broom you’re not using anymore, or spending time with someone because you have nothing better to do. It doesn’t make you...stick your neck out.”

Astoria’s eyes ran over Draco’s face thoughtfully. Then she glanced at the table on the opposite side of her bed, where a small bundle of tightly wrapped sheets sat neatly.

Draco turned to look over at the bundle, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“Your owl?”

Astoria nodded.

“I didn’t want Madame Pomfrey to take him,” she murmured. “I want to bury him myself...once I’m out of here.”

She bowed her head, trying to hide the fresh tears prickling at her eyes.

Discomfort rippled over Draco’s stony face as he glanced from the bundle on the table to Astoria’s face and back.

He had very little experience with comforting people – Crabbe or Goyle certainly never looked for any sort of encouragement outside of Draco’s usual brand of peer pressure, and Pansy...well, she was the one who usually comforted *Draco*, not the other way around. Draco had always known he could vent as much as he wanted, and Pansy would always be right there to pet his hair and massage his shoulders until he felt validated enough that he’d calmed down.

With a slight frown, Draco hesitantly extended a hand and brought it through Astoria’s dark hair.

Instead of looking the least bit comforted, however, the Ravenclaw immediately catapulted away from his hand.

“What are you doing?”

Draco flinched back defensively.

“Sorry – Merlin’s beard, just trying to – oh, forget it,” he grumbled irritably.

He got up, making the bed springs squeak quietly with his abrupt withdrawal.

“Wait.”

Draco froze mid-step. Astoria brought her knees up against her chest under the sheets, watching his back hesitantly. She bit the inside of her cheek awkwardly.

“...I’m not really in the mood to sleep. Could you...sit here for a little while? Just so...”

Her ice blue eyes narrowed gloomily upon the sheets.

“...Just so I’m not alone?”

She had no idea why she was asking this. If she were honest, she was half-convinced Draco would laugh in her face, given his nasty history. But at the same time, something was different about him – something that Astoria couldn’t fully comprehend just yet – and it was enough that she wondered if he might actually have become somewhat decent along the line...

Draco didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then, very slowly, he stepped backward and returned to the end of Astoria’s bed, his stormy gray eyes running over her face.

‘When did that obnoxious boy who blared out his feelings for the whole world to hear become so hard to read?’ wondered Astoria.

Frowning in confusion, she nonetheless relaxed slightly once the respectful distance between them had been restored.

“...Wagtail was all I’d really had left,” she admitted softly. “I mean, yeah, I have Daphne and Millicent too, but...well, they’re in Slytherin and they’re older than me, so I only ever get to see them when we’re on breaks. Hilary Erskine’s still here, but she’s sort of okay with blood purity and all that, so I don’t talk to her. Everyone else...well, they’re all in hiding now...except...”

She hugged her knees tightly.

“Except R.J.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed slightly. “...Arjuna Belaji, you mean.”

Astoria bit her lip, giving a weak nod. Her eyes filled up with tears that she fiercely forced back.

“She was my best friend,” she mumbled. “I always imagined, at the end of the War, being able to go back to school with her – that we’d graduate together – that we’d be at each other’s weddings – that we’d be friends forever. But now...”

Unable to fully fight back her tears, she hid her face under her arms. Draco looked more uncomfortable than ever as his gray eyes ran over her frame and the top of her head. He opened his mouth briefly, but quickly closed it again, deciding instead to tentatively bring an arm around her shoulders.

Astoria straightened up abruptly, bringing her hands up to shove him off.

“Stop it!” she rasped uncomfortably.

Draco whirled on her with frustration in his face.

“Well, what the *hell* do you *want* me to do!?” he snapped at her. “I’ve never imagined doing all

sorts of things with someone like that! I've never watched my pet die, or gotten over the death of someone I cared about! I *still* haven't accepted what happened to my father! There's nothing I can say to stop you from crying, and you won't let me comfort you, yet you want me to stick around. Do you just want me to sit around and feel useless, is that it!?"

"Just *LISTEN!*" Astoria shot back, her raspy voice strained with pain. "I don't want you coddling me – I don't like it! I don't need you to try to fix my problems – you *can't!* I just...I'm not like Daphne or Mother or Father – I can't just bottle up my feelings until they explode! I need to let them out and know that I won't be judged for it – that I won't...that my feelings won't be seen as some problem or burden, but just...*my feelings.*"

Draco stared at Astoria, perfectly stunned. He didn't speak for a very long moment – his brain seemed to be turning this information over several times in an attempt to digest it. Then, at last, despite the lingering confusion clinging to his features, he shifted himself slightly on the bed and inclined his head to Astoria, as if silently beckoning her to speak again.

Still feeling faintly uncomfortable, Astoria returned her gaze to the sheets, hugging her knees close to her chest.

"...After I was sorted into Ravenclaw...Daphne stopped talking to me. Mother and Father kept me at arm's length too. They were ashamed of me. I learned later that it was more complicated than that, but...well, it felt awful, back then. I'd started doing everything on my own...studying, doing homework...visiting Wagtail in the owlery. Then one day, when I was in the library, R.J. asked if she could sit next to me. I was reading something for this Charms assignment, and I'd taken the last book, so R.J. asked if we could share the book and she could read over my shoulder. I was so stunned that I just nodded, and R.J. sat next to me for the next hour, reading and taking notes next to me. We didn't talk at all the rest of the time, but when we were done, R.J. followed me out of the library and asked if we could do it again sometime. And...well, we did. Even when we got older, we would read together. And during the holidays that first year, when I ended up staying at Hogwarts rather than go home...R.J. stayed behind to keep me company. Her parents even ended up sending me Christmas presents that year...even if they had never met me before! All they knew was that I was Arjuna's friend and that I didn't have a family to spend the holidays with, and they treated me like I was their own daughter. And they did that every year that I didn't go home, all the way up until this last one..."

Draco's eyes drifted up to Astoria's face, which was wet with fresh tears.

"...She really meant a lot to you," he said lowly. The thought was foreign to Draco, but it sounded true when he said it aloud.

Astoria nodded. Draco once again felt as though he wanted to reach out, but contented himself with

taking hold of the sheets.

“R.J. said in her last letter that she was leaving us her unbreakable hope,” she said quietly. “But I just...I don’t know. I want to hope – I want to believe things will get better...but they just...don’t. They’ve only gotten worse...”

She rested her forehead on top of her knees, hiding her face again. Draco slouched slightly, leaning up against the frame at the foot of the bed.

“I know,” he said quietly.

As he said it, though, his mother’s face rippled over his mind’s eye.

“He is only assured of our loyalty because he believes our fear is stronger than any shred of hope we might harbor.”

Draco brought a hand up to his breast, feeling the Moly plant that Narcissa had given him so long ago and he’d affixed to the inside. He glanced at Astoria, his jaw clenching.

“...But that’s just it, isn’t it?”

Astoria looked up at him, her tearful eyes confused.

“The Dark Lord *wants* us to be afraid,” said Draco. “If we’re afraid, well, we’ll be loyal to him. We’ll do what he says...even if it’s against our own self-interest.”

He crossed his legs, leaning forward slightly but keeping a respectful distance between him and Astoria.

“There’s no hope that I can see,” he said grimly. “But I know others see it. And those others...”

He hesitated, bringing a hand up to the breast of his robes. Then, his eyes flickering from his hand

to Astoria's face and back again, he opened them up to reveal the white flower tucked inside.

"...They're in our corner," he said with a slight smirk.

Astoria's eyes widened upon the flower; then they darted up at Draco's face in shock.

"...You're working against You-Know-Who?" she whispered, disbelieving.

"So you *do* know what it means," said Draco, and his shoulders relaxed in relief despite himself as he released his robes. "Guess I should've expected your parents were in on it and told you about it..."

"They didn't tell Daphne and me," Astoria said quickly. "We overheard them talking about it with Uncle Hyperion."

She paused.

"But then...if you *are* working against You-Know-Who, then you've got to think there's hope."

Draco scoffed. "I told you, I don't. But others do. My mother does."

Astoria's eyes narrowed. "I don't think that's true. If you didn't think there was hope, then why would you put yourself at risk? Why wouldn't you turn in our parents, to save your own skin? Why would you help me and risk putting yourself on the Carrows' bad side?"

"I already said I don't know why I did it," Draco shot back stubbornly.

"Do you believe You-Know-Who is invincible?" challenged Astoria.

"Of course he is," said Draco at once. "Well – I mean, he fell before, yeah, but he came right back."

“He tried to come back several times, actually,” Astoria pointed out. “Potter just stopped him.”

“Yeah, but that was just dumb luck...”

Draco trailed off, his stormy gray eyes suddenly growing very wide.

“...*Potter*,” he whispered. “That’s...*that’s* why...”

His face suddenly spread into a strange, demented sort of smile – one that seemed to stretch his mouth painfully wide.

“Potter defeated the Dark Lord last time. He defeated him in first year, second year – he even faced him twice, at the height of his power, and somehow made it out alive – all out of *pure, dumb luck!*”

He brought both hands up to his pale face, trailing over his eyes and down his cheeks.

“Potter’s still alive,” he said. “Even after everything, he’s still alive – otherwise the Dark Lord would’ve paraded his body through the streets. And if stupid *Potter* could somehow have enough luck to make it out alive...then people probably think there’s a chance *they* could too...that he could save them. Whether he’s that ‘*Chosen One*’ or not...he’s the only person on Earth who probably has enough dumb luck to face the Dark Lord...and actually *win*.”

Astoria smiled slightly. “So you *do* think there’s hope.”

Draco tried to smirk, but the effect was weakened somewhat by the genuine relief rippling over his features.

“Hope in *Potter*? That’s rich.”

Rose's Promise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The morning of March 21 was sunny, but the mood at Beau Plumpton's house had been gray. Rose had been missing breakfasts off and on for the last few weeks, and this day was no exception. She'd told Trudy to go on ahead that morning, claiming with a forced smile that she'd make something for herself later, and once Trudy had left, she'd flopped down stomach-first onto her bed, her blue eyes trailing glumly over the sheets.

She hated how much the mornings would drag. Sometimes she'd just wish that the others in the house would just instantly be up and about – that Beau would be at work, Noel would be reading, Trudy would be cleaning, and Lucius would be playing the piano as soon as she got up every morning. They'd be all busy with their respective pastimes, living life as usual – and neither she nor they had to focus on her at all. They wouldn't have to try to cheer her up...they wouldn't have to check and see if she was okay...and she could just pretend that she was.

Feeling too ill to take out her scrapbook, Rose instead fumbled around for a spare spiral-bound notebook. She opened it to a blank page and reached for her pack of gel pens. For the next few minutes, she doodled, drawing purple and gold squiggles and suns in the corners of the pages.

"The night is always darkest before the dawn, and although we don't know how long this night will be, I am confident that the sun shall rise again..."

Rose's grip on her pen tightened at the thought of Arjuna's words.

"Rose dear?"

The little Hufflepuff looked up. Trudy had descended from the ladder into their shared room again, still dressed in her peach-colored dressing gown and fuzzy maroon slippers.

"Is breakfast over already?" asked Rose, startled.

"Hasn't even started, actually," said Trudy. "Beau was hoping you'd come upstairs and join us for a bit. He said you don't have to eat anything, but he'd like you to be there."

Rose looked down at her notebook, her stomach squirming slightly. Trudy sidled over, lowering herself carefully onto the younger witch's bed.

"I know you're not feeling up to it," she said softly, her eyes crinkled up with sympathy. "But from the sound of things, Beau's arranged something nice. I reckon he thinks it might make you feel better. Even if it doesn't...I'm sure it'd mean a lot to him if you let him try."

Mr. Whiskers walked over Rose's back to brush up against Trudy, and the old woman raised a coffee-colored hand through his white fur.

Though not thoroughly enthused, Rose sighed quietly and nodded.

"Okay."

A few moments later, Trudy and Rose popped out of the trapdoor in the staircase and headed over to the kitchen.

Lucius, Noel, and Beau were seated around the table, which was properly set but had no breakfast food on it. Lucius had turned on the CD player and was listening to the music (performed by an artist named Sarah Brightman) with his eyes closed. Noel was petting Darcy as the black cat paced around and around their chair, and Beau was busying himself with his briefcase, which was open in his lap.

When Rose and Trudy entered, the three all looked up. Beau's face brightened.

"Hi, Rose!" he said, quickly closing the briefcase with a *snap* and putting it down on the floor next to his chair. "Go ahead, sit down – let me just get it out –"

Beau leapt out of his chair, practically skipping over to the refrigerator.

Her pudgy-cheeked face scrunched up in confusion, Rose nonetheless followed Trudy's example and sat down at her usual spot next to Lucius at the table. She exchanged a perplexed look with Noel, who sat across from her, as Beau fetched a white, square-shaped box from the top shelf of

the freezer. He carried it with both hands over to the table, plopping it down in front of Lucius's place setting.

"Happy birthday to you," he sang cheerily, and Lucius gave a start.

"Happy birthday to you," Trudy joined in immediately, *"Happy birthday, dear Lucius – happy birthday to you!"*

Trudy and Beau both clapped brightly, with Noel following suit in reluctant politeness. Rose turned to Lucius, startled.

"It's your birthday today, Mr. Malfoy?" she asked.

Lucius glanced at her uncomfortably. "Yes...though I don't believe I *mentioned* it to anyone present..."

He shot Beau a suspicious look. The younger man merely laughed as he opened the box, to reveal a white-frosted cake with the words *"Happy Birthday"* written in mint green icing.

"I'm sure you've never had an ice cream cake before," said Beau casually, "but I figured you'd *have* to like chocolate, given how much of Rose's Yule Log you devoured –"

"Don't exaggerate," Lucius cut him off dully, as Noel sniggered.

Beau served a piece to everyone present, including Rose, who accepted it to be polite even if she claimed she wasn't hungry. The mint chocolate ice cream cake was delicious – even Lucius deemed it "not bad," which was a compliment and a half from him.

"So," said Beau stridently as the five ate their cake, "in lieu of Lucius's birthday, and the *ridiculous* amount of time you lot have spent with me – almost ten months! Blimey! – I've decided that the five of us need a little bit of fresh air. So today...we're going to the movies!"

Beau's four tenants all straightened up in visible surprise.

“To the *what?*” said Lucius, his nose wrinkling up in confusion.

“You mean we’re going *outside?*” said Noel, sounding excited despite themselves. “*Really?!*”

“Yep,” said Beau. “You’ve all been having a hard time...and whenever I’m going through something rough, I love going to the theater, so I thought, maybe you all might want to come with me!”

He glanced at Rose out the corner of his eye, suddenly looking much more self-conscious. A rush of gratitude washed over Rose, and she gave him a tiny smile.

“Do you really think it’s *safe*, Beau?” asked Trudy in concern. “I mean, the War’s still going on... and Noel and Rose are just children.”

“I know,” said Beau, glancing from Trudy to Lucius. “It’s dangerous out there, so I knew we’d have to take some precautions. For one, we’ll have to go in disguise. We’ll also have to travel incognito, like Muggles, and make sure we have a quick way to get to safety in case of an emergency. I talked to Chef Ramsay about it these last few weeks, and he helped me get a hold of these.”

He got up, walked over to the cupboard, and started taking things out and putting them down on the kitchen counter. First were several bottles filled with a disgusting, mud-like liquid; next, five cloaks made of silky, star-like fabric; and finally five pairs of orange knit gloves emblazoned with the signature “WWW” logo of Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes.

“You and Lucius will use Polyjuice Potion, Trudy,” Beau explained, “since you two are the most likely to be recognized by other witches and wizards. I’m thinking Rose and Noel are young enough that we can get away with hair dye and different clothes – maybe even some cosmetic charms, if we’re feeling ambitious. We’ll then also keep Invisibility Cloaks and Shield Gloves with us, which can hide and protect us in case of an attack. Then of course I’ll be keeping *this* with me,” he held up his worn leather briefcase with a smile. “I found it hidden under the floorboards in my gran’s old room – she used to travel a lot, but she was a perfect skinflint when it came to hotel accommodations. Have a look.”

Curious, Rose swiveled her head around to look at Beau’s briefcase. As she tried to look closer at the messy contents, however, she suddenly found herself being yanked forward off her seat, flipping around in the air as she fell headfirst into nothingness.

“WAAAAH!”

In an instant she landed on an old-fashioned bed with white lace linens with an over-the-top *bounce* worthy of a child’s bouncy castle. Dust flew up into the air, making Rose cough and sneeze.

Wiping her nose, Rose looked up and gawked.

The room she’d appeared in looked like something out of a Victorian museum, with lace doilies and burgundy velvet draperies. There was a cherry wardrobe with a unicorn carved into the door, a tiny toilet and claw-foot tub, and a baby grand piano set up in the corner. It was also rather dusty – likely the space hadn’t been used in years. Even so, Rose could still hear the voices of her companions echoing through the ceiling, which was covered in a tacky music-note-printed wallpaper that resembled the inside of Beau’s briefcase.

“It’s okay, Noel!” said Beau’s voice reassuringly. “It’s a portable room in a briefcase. It’s pretty old, so I never would’ve used it to house any of you...but if you four had to, say, stay out of sight for a little while, I could carry you home with me without anyone seeing.”

Rose brushed some of the dust out of her nose and smiled up at the ceiling.

“Great idea, Beau!” she shouted. “So...how exactly do I get out of here?”

She heard Lucius give a quiet snort of laughter.

“Stand on something like a chair or a bed,” said Trudy’s voice, and she’d slowed her speech down so that her words were extra crisp and clear. “Then give a really big jump.”

Rose climbed back onto the bed, wobbling slightly on the shaky mattress, and, taking a deep breath, she jumped as high as she could.

In an instant she was soaring up and out of the briefcase, falling back down toward the kitchen floor she had, just moments before, been standing on. Rose yelped, startled by the sudden yank of gravity, and landed in a clumsy heap.

“Rose!” said Noel, dashing over. “Are you okay?”

“*Oh* – yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” said Rose. She gave a great sneeze, wiping her nose on her arm. “... Beau, you might want to give the inside a good dusting before we go.”

An hour later the group left the house, disguised and ready. They all climbed into Beau’s beat-up silver Corsa, Lucius in the passenger seat and Trudy, Noel, and Rose piled up in the back, and Beau drove them out of their cozy neighborhood and toward the center of town.

Within the first minute of getting into Beau’s Corsa, Lucius decided he hated cars. By the time Beau had parked in the lot outside the movie theater and turned off the vehicle, the Malfoy patriarch was more than ready to get out.

“*Really*, Lucius,” Beau couldn’t help but laugh, “haven’t you ever taken the Knight Bus before?”

Lucius shot Beau a dirty look over the top of the car. The expression looked noticeably less intimidating than it should have, given that Lucius was currently disguised as a much shorter elderly gentleman with watery brown eyes.

“*No*, I haven’t,” he said sourly, his face slightly green. “Never *had* to, would I have, when I could just *Apparate*...”

Still smiling in amusement, Beau helped Trudy out of the back. The elderly woman needed less help than she would have normally, as she was disguised as a much younger woman with a stylish Afro and golden brown eyes. Once Trudy was out, Rose and Noel slid out of the car behind her. They’d decided to wear each other’s clothes, with Noel wearing Rose’s hot pink hooded jacket over a magenta turtleneck dress, a red wool beret, and pink-and-white striped stockings and Rose wearing an oversized white jumper under Noel’s denim overalls and high-topped pink sneakers. Trudy had curled and Charmed Rose’s hair a Weasley-like ginger color, and Beau had given Noel a rather pretty black wig that Rose thought made them look like a younger Posh Spice.

In contrast to Lucius, Noel looked positively over the moon at stepping out of Beau’s car. They spun around twice, swinging their arms loosely as they took in the snow-capped, only-half-full parking lot – then they turned to Rose, their hazel eyes alight with mischief.

“Race you to the front door, Rose!”

Without waiting for her or the others to answer, they were off.

“*HEY!*” Rose called after Noel with a laugh as she dashed after them. “NO FAIR, NOEL!”

Trudy opened her mouth, ready to call after them, but Beau put a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s okay, Trudy,” he said gently. “They won’t go too far, and we can catch up. Besides...I think Rose could really use that little bit of joy.”

Trudy’s eyes softened.

“She needs a lot more of it,” she murmured with a sad smile. “She took such a job onto her shoulders...trying to give all of us a bit of sunshine...”

“I don’t reckon she saw it as any sort of *job*,” said Beau amusedly. “A hobby, more like – something that brought her just as much happiness as it did us.”

Lucius’s gaze flickered over to Noel and Rose as they met at the front doors of the theater, Noel playfully dancing around in victory and Rose laughing as she chased after them, punching their shoulders.

The two orbited around each other like planets, as if in a weird astrological twist, Rose was the sun circling the Earth.

Once the adults had caught up, the group headed for the box office. Like before, Noel dashed to the front of the line before anyone else could, dragging Rose along by the hand behind them.

“So a ‘*movie*’ is a Muggle theater?” asked Lucius, glancing at Beau out the side of his eye.

“It’s like a play,” Beau explained, “except it’s played on a screen, rather than performed live. They end up looking a bit like wizard photographs, except there’s also sound.”

Lucius’s brows rose over his narrowed eyes. “Sounds like an overly complicated performance method. You find such a thing entertaining?”

Beau frowned disapprovingly. “Very much so.”

“Mm...well, you’ve expressed good artistic taste previously,” granted Lucius idly, “so the novelty should have its merits.”

Noel and Rose reached the box office window, swinging their linked hands back and forth.

“Which one should we see?” Noel asked absently.

Rose scanned the titles. Toward the very end she caught sight of a title she recognized.

“*Titanic!*” she said brightly. “Cho went to go see that with her friend Lalo – she said it was really good!” She looked over her shoulder. “Beau, can we see *Titanic*?”

Beau looked oddly reluctant. “I don’t think so, Rose. *Titanic*’s...well...I don’t think most of us would like it...”

He approached the window, smiling at the man on the other side pleasantly as he took out his wallet.

“G’morning – I’d like four adult tickets and one senior ticket for *Anastasia*, please.”

The ticker-seller, who wore a nametag reading “*JAMAL*,” glanced from Rose to Beau in surprise, before he put on his best smile.

“You got it!”

Jamal opened his drawer, fetching out a roll of tickets and sticking them into the printer. As he waited for them to print, his olive green eyes swiveled over the party thoughtfully.

“...Have you seen *Titanic* yet?” he asked casually.

“No,” said Rose, “but my friend said it’s really good.”

Jamal’s face spread into a grin. “Your friend is absolutely right. James Cameron directed it – dunno if you know him, he did *Terminator* and a few other things, but the effects are just *amazing* – it really feels like you’re *there*, y’know? The CGI and the models – it’s just seamless!” He shot a fleeting glance at Beau. “And, y’know...it’s not true what they say, about it being just for girls. I mean, sure, it’s got a love story in it, but hey, blokes can be in those too, right?”

He punched a few buttons on top of the ticket printer without even looking at it. Clearly he’d worked at this theater for a while and knew the routine by heart.

“Have you seen *Anastasia*?” asked Noel.

“Of course!” laughed Jamal. “I work in a movie theater, after all. Not my personal favorite of Don Bluth’s movies, but the animation’s as good as ever and the music’s great. Don’t really dig the whole ‘*evil sorcerer*’ direction they went with for the villain, but hey, I wasn’t expecting historical authenticity...”

Lucius’s posture straightened slightly.

“‘*Evil sorcerer*?’” he repeated lowly, his eyes narrowing critically upon Beau. The Squib swallowed uncomfortably.

The ticket printer gave a *click* and Jamal ripped the tickets off the reel.

“Sorry, I’m rambling,” the young man said self-effacingly, scribbling something on one of the tickets. “You get a film major talking, and look what happens, they spoil the bloody movie for you

– your total will be eighteen pounds.”

Beau took the money out of his wallet and passed it through the window to Jamal. The ticket-seller counted it out and then handed Beau his tickets and change with a bright smile.

“Enjoy your movie!”

With a polite nod, Beau walked away from the window, the others following behind.

“You failed to mention that this play featured an evil sorcerer,” Lucius said coldly.

“I...didn’t know that,” Beau mumbled awkwardly, shoving the change into his wallet and putting it away in his coat pocket. “But it’s a musical, so I thought...”

As Beau picked apart the black-printed tickets, however, he found there was one too many. Pulling the sixth one apart from the others, he found it was filled out with blue ink by hand.

Congratulations! You’ve won a set of free movie tickets good for a party of five (5). Present this certificate to the ticket taker within twenty-four hours of this ticket’s printing and you’ll be given admittance to one (1) movie of your choice.

Certified by Jamal Qareen, J.A.Q.

“What is it, Beau?” asked Trudy, as she curiously looked over his shoulder.

Beau looked up from the ticket at the others, faintly bewildered. “...Seems we have a set of free tickets...”

Noel and Rose’s faces both lit up.

“Then we can go see *Titanic*!” said Noel.

“Oh, Beau, can we please?” begged Rose, pulling on Beau’s arm like a child at a toy store.

Lucius looked from the ticket in Beau's hand to up at his face. "Do we know what this '*Titanic*' is about?"

"Well, I know there was a Muggle ship called Titanic," said Trudy slowly. "It sank on its maiden voyage, right, Beau?"

"Mm..." Beau looked incredibly uncomfortable.

"It's a romance!" Rose said brightly. "Cho talked about it in her letters – she said it was beautiful and that the ship looked so real."

"The ticket guy said that too," said Noel, sounding excited. "Come on, Beau, let's do it – it'd be nasty of us not to use that ticket, when the guy gave it to us for free."

"And the movie came pretty well-recommended," said Trudy encouragingly. "That boy looked like a kid at Christmas, talking about it."

Beau bit his lip, glancing around at his tenants uncertainly. He had a very bad feeling that *Titanic* would be the absolute *worst* thing to see right then...but he had to admit, *Anastasia* would probably not be as good of an option as he'd initially thought. If the villain *was* an evil sorcerer, then that meant that the story basically centered around an evil wizard chasing and trying to murder a Muggle princess...and Beau didn't imagine that would wash over so well with ex-Death Eater Lucius Malfoy.

"...All right," Beau sighed lowly. "Let's go see *Titanic*."

The five sat toward the back of the theater, just far enough away from the other people in the audience and the projector at the back of the room that they could be certain they wouldn't be overheard. Noel sat in the center of the row, with Trudy to their right and Rose to their left, while Beau sat on Trudy's other side and Lucius sat next to Rose. Beau had ordered candy and a bag of popcorn for the group to share, but Lucius chose not to take part.

"A play should be enjoyed without distractions," said Lucius solemnly.

As the lights dimmed and the movie began, Rose and Noel exchanged big smiles. The beginning had been difficult for Lucius to follow since he knew nothing about submarines or any kind of Muggle technology, but Beau shot him and Trudy some quick, whispered exposition, and by the time the movie introduced the main character, now an old woman, everyone was up to speed.

“This is Brock Lovett, how can I help you, Mrs. – ?”

“Calvert. Rose Calvert.”

Noel, Trudy, Beau, and Lucius all turned to look at Rose.

“*Rose?*” mouthed Noel, their face stretched with delight.

Rose laughed through a thick blush.

The name choice became even more amusing as the film went on and the name was repeated over and over again. Rose, however, was less entertained by the name of the protagonist than how the character looked when she finally appeared on screen as a young woman. The little Hufflepuff immediately turned to Lucius, her blue eyes sparkling.

“She looks a lot like your mum, Mr. Malfoy!” she whispered to him.

Lucius glanced at the girl out the corner of his eye and then up at the screen. He had to admit she was right. The character resembled his late mother more than just a little, not just in hair and eye color, but also in her posture: proud and graceful, yet also child-like and faintly stiff.

True to what Cho and Jamal had said, the ship looked incredible. Rose knew that it had to all be just a trick, but there were more than a few times that she had no idea how it *couldn't* be real, when people were walking through it and around it as easily as she walked around Beau's house. It clearly threw Lucius off a bit too – he kept squinting at the screen, as if trying to figure out what magic the Muggle crew had gotten their hands on to make everything look so real.

Jack Dawson very quickly became most of the group's favorite character. When he climbed to the front of the ship, hooting and hollering in victory, Rose couldn't stop herself from throwing her

arms over her head and cheering too.

“*WHOO!*”

“*Shh!*” hissed Trudy and Beau, but they were laughing too.

Just as quickly as Jack became most of the group’s favorite character, Cal Hockley became most everyone’s *least* favorite. Several times Trudy caught Noel making faces whenever Cal appeared on screen – others she caught Lucius studying the character very carefully, his narrowed eyes almost melancholy. That melancholy look flickered in and out of Lucius’s eyes a few times; when the character Rose ran to the back of the ship, ready to jump off, Lucius’s gaze appeared so endless it was as if he was looking right through the screen.

As Rose looked over Jack’s artwork, Trudy and Lucius both took a swig of Polyjuice Potion, grimacing in disgust.

“I’d quite forgotten how vile this stuff tastes,” muttered Lucius.

Trudy chuckled. “Yes – yes, so had I.”

“But the purpose of university is to find a suitable husband – Rose has already done that.”

Noel grimaced. “What a crock – who thinks like that?”

“More people than you think, boy,” said Lucius coolly.

“Noel’s not a boy, Mr. Malfoy,” Rose corrected him lowly.

“Yes, yes, whatever...”

Noel ended up disliking the character Rose's mother Ruth even more than Cal. When Jack was invited into the first class dining hall, Noel couldn't have more satisfied when Jack showed Cal and Ruth up. They didn't stop grinning at all until Cal angrily confronted the character Rose the next morning.

“My fiancée...MY FIANCEE! YES, YOU ARE, AND MY WIFE!”

When Cal got to his feet, violently smacking the table between them over, all five people jumped. No one moved or spoke while Cal got right up in the character Rose's face, or even when he walked away. It was only once the maid came to start picking things up that any of them moved.

The real Rose glanced from Noel, who looked shocked and furious, to Lucius. The older man, disguised to look much older, nevertheless looked shakier and tenser than he should have been, his eyes locked on the screen.

“Mr. Malfoy?” murmured Rose.

He looked up, startled by her voice.

“Are you all right?” the little witch asked.

Lucius considered her for a moment, his eyes still oddly stricken. Then he turned back to the screen, forcing the anxiety out of his expression.

“...Yes. Fine.”

The characters Jack and Rose tried in vain to stay apart, but like magnets, they came together, to the delight of the audience. Their bond grew so strong that eventually the “spoiled little rich girl” made a request of the poor artist.

“Jack, I want you to draw me like one of your French girls...wearing this.”

"All right."

"...Wearing only this."

Lucius, glancing out the side of his eye at Rose, put off the most dignified air he could.

“You will avert your eyes until I say, bantling,” he said crisply. “Understand?”

Rose blinked confusedly at Lucius. “Huh?”

When the character Rose came into the room only in a robe, Noel’s eyes bulged and their cheeks flushed darkly. Trudy, noticing this at once, shot a hand up to cover the fifteen-year-old’s eyes.

“Wha – hey!”

Now thoroughly distracted by Noel’s outbursts, Rose turned away from the screen, giggling into her hands as she watched Trudy try to suppress Noel. Lucius exhaled in something like relief and turned back to the screen.

Once Trudy had successfully distracted Noel (and a laughing Rose) from watching the raunchy scene in the car, Trudy and Lucius took another swig of Polyjuice, puckering their lips in disgust.

“This has gone on quite a while, hasn’t it?” murmured Trudy, glancing at Beau. “It’s got to be just about over now, hasn’t it?”

“Just about,” said Beau with a shaky nod.

And sure enough, as they said it, the iceberg finally appeared. Even though everyone in the audience knew what was going to happen, it felt like everything they’d seen with Jack, Rose, Cal,

Ruth, Molly, and the lot had obscured that obvious outcome. For a moment, everyone tensed in their seats, as if they thought there might be a chance the ship would get through unscathed, only for the inevitable to come anyway. And as things went from bad to worse on screen, one could've heard a pin drop in the theater as all of the characters bustled around, many completely unaware of the danger they were in.

“Sir, Carpathia says they’re making 17 knots: full steam for them, sir!”

“She’s the only one who’s responding?”

“The only one close, sir. She says they can be here in four hours.”

Trudy’s hands flew up to her mouth as she gasped.

“Four? But – but there aren’t enough boats for everyone...oh Merlin – ”

His eyes welling up with concern, Beau turned to her and the others.

“Trudy,” he said urgently, *“we should go – you don’t want to see this – ”*

Noel’s head shot around abruptly. *“No!”*

“No, we gotta make sure Jack and Rose are okay!” agreed Rose anxiously.

Beau looked around at them all, his face conflicted. Lucius adjusted himself so he could look over the others’ heads at Beau.

“We don’t want to cause a scene by rushing out all at once,” he said levelly. *“If the children must go, Ms. Bonham may take them.”*

“Lucius,” murmured Beau, *“I don’t know if it’d be all right for you, either – ”*

“I’ve seen my fair share of death, Mr. Plumpton,” Lucius cut him off grimly. “I’ll manage.”

Rose looked from Lucius to Beau pleadingly. “Beau, I’ll be okay too! I *promise* I will!”

“And I’m sticking with Rose,” Noel said fiercely. “She stays, I stay.”

Feeling reluctant but knowing he’d been overruled, Beau slowly settled back down. Despite the paleness of her face, Trudy offered Beau a reassuring smile.

“It’s all right, Beau,” she said kindly. “It’s only pretend, after all.”

Beau looked down at the floor, his eyes very grim. “...Of course.”

The whole thing *was* only pretend. The third-class passengers trapped behind locked gates at the base of the ship – the loading of women and children into boats – even Jack locked downstairs, as the ship sank deeper and deeper – all of it was fake, made for the camera. Yet Beau, Trudy, Noel, Rose, and Lucius watched and felt for these people – these fake, imaginary people, with dialogue written by Hollywood screenwriters – and they *cared*. They cared when Rose ran away from Cal and left her mother behind to save Jack. They cared when women were separated from their husbands while boarding the lifeboats. They cared when Rose refused to leave Jack behind, and when Cal, devastated and furious, chased after them, gun in hand. They cared when Tommy was shot, when Mr. Andrews chose to stay behind, when the band kept playing despite the chaos, and when Fabrizio was crushed by one of Titanic’s massive funnels. The ship sank faster and faster, water flooding corridors and china and glass shattering. Then, finally, everyone in the audience – Beau and his tenants included – watched with baited breath, as the ship descended into the depths forever, amongst the terrified screams of its once-passengers.

“*Merlin’s beard*,” whispered Trudy.

Lucius glanced over at Beau with narrowed eyes.

“...And this...this is just a Muggle play?” he said lowly, trying to keep his voice steady.

“Mm-hmm,” said Beau, clenching his jaw tensely. “It’s based on real things and real people, but... it’s all fake.”

Even though the ship was gone, however, the worst had only just begun. The audience watched in horror as people bobbed in the freezing cold water, screaming for help – and the women and crewmen in the boats stayed still and did nothing.

“I don’t understand a one of ya! What’s the matter with you?! It’s your men out there!”

“What are they *doing*?!” cried Trudy, losing her composure for the first time. “Why won’t they go back!? Why won’t they even *try* to see if their family is out there?!”

“Denial.”

Everyone looked at Lucius. He looked paler than any of them had ever seen him, even with much less pointed, white features, as he stared up at the screen.

“They’re afraid,” he said quietly, “so afraid that they don’t *dare* fancy the idea that their family’s out there, screaming for their help. They’re afraid for themselves, if their place were threatened... and they’re afraid of what might happen if they were to go back. They’d either find nothing...or worse...find their loved one, too late.”

He swallowed.

“People will accept a lie, if it protects them from opening themselves up to more pain and grief. Imagine how much worse those women would feel...knowing not only that their husbands were dead...but also that they turned into mad animals – clawing, shoving – tossing aside other lives in an attempt to save their own...that they screamed and suffered...all the way up until the end. Better for them to imagine them accepting their death like a hero...than to know that they ran from death like a coward.”

Everyone stared at Lucius, stunned. Feeling a wave of pity wash over her, Rose reached out a hand and took hold of Lucius’s, which was wrinkled and frail thanks to the effects of the Polyjuice

Potion he'd taken. Lucius looked at her, startled; then, his face relaxing slightly, he picked up his jug of Polyjuice and took another swig, so as to distract himself from looking at anyone.

“You must promise me...that you’ll survive. That you won’t give up...no matter what happens. No matter how hopeless. ...Promise me now, Rose...and never let go of that promise.”

“I promise.”

“Never let go.”

“I’ll never let go, Jack. I promise.”

As the minutes dragged on, more heartbreak ensued, even as a lifeboat floated over the movie screen, searching for survivors. Corpses floated up and down in the water – men, women...even a mother holding her baby close to her chest.

Then, worst of all, was Jack. Brave Jack, who just moments ago had spoken such inspirational words of hope, had become another casualty. Another statistic. Just like Dumbledore. Just like Millicent Bagnold. Just like Owen and his mother. Just like Eddie. Just like Roger. ...Just like Arjuna.

Rose’s eyes flooded with tears. Unable to fight back her grief, she buried her face into the crook of Noel’s neck, squeezing Lucius’s hand in a vice grip. She and Noel both sobbed, holding each other tightly as if it was all they knew how to do. They cried quietly in the back of the theater for a long while, unable to fight back the very real feelings that these fake characters and images had wrought from them.

“Come back.”

Rose stiffened.

“Come back. Come back!”

Very slowly, she raised her head, blinking through her tears at the movie screen.

The red-haired character called Rose, despite her lack of strength and her grief, was suddenly gasping weakly at the open air, even if she was too quiet for anyone to hear her:

“Come back! Come back!”

Rose’s eyes widened as the red-haired Rose on screen released Jack’s hands and pushed herself off of the wood she’d been lying on into the water.

“She’s...”

“Keeping her promise.”

Rose looked at Lucius, her blue eyes wide. The light from the screen bounded off his profile, highlighting two silvery streaks that trailed from his eyes down either cheek.

“Sometimes there are lives you can’t save,” he murmured. “But you languishing at the loss of them...that doesn’t help either you or them, does it?”

He glanced at Rose, looking her straight in the eye solemnly.

“You can grieve. You *must* grieve. But love is expressed through *action*, not inaction. If you truly loved them...then you must keep living. And as impossible as it might seem...you will move on, and your heart will heal.”

Rose felt fresh tears bubbling over her eyes as she stared at Lucius. Then, her lips crinkling up in a sad smile, she squeezed his hand again and nodded.

“...I understand.”

Lucius inclined his head to her slightly. “Good.”

The entire theater echoed with the sound of crying as the movie came to a close. Everyone seemed just as moved by Jack’s death as Beau and his tenants were, even without the context of the Second Wizarding War in their minds. There was an audible gasp when the elderly Rose on screen dropped the Heart of the Ocean into the sea, and the scene faded away to the old woman sleeping in bed alongside her collection of photographs.

“She did everything,” whispered Noel with a soft smile, “went everywhere. Look, she even rode a horse with one leg on each side.”

“Just like Jack told her to,” choked Rose through a weak smile.

And it was then, as the elderly Rose Calvert began to dream of the sunken Titanic and her mind brought it back to life with living, breathing color, that Rose Zeller finally understood.

Things were horrible. Things had been dark and sad and hopeless...but that didn’t mean that they would *always* be. Because with every friendship she’d made, she’d unknowingly made a promise to each of them – a promise that she would be happy – happy with them, and happy without. Even if they had to part ways – even if that friendship fractured – even if they would never see each other again – she still had that promise inside of her: a promise that she would chase her own happiness, however fleeting it seemed to be.

And as Rose left the theater with Beau, Trudy, Noel, and Lucius, she was smiling through her tears with a kind of optimism she hadn’t felt in weeks.

“Must we *really* get in that vile contraption again?” growled Lucius, glaring at Beau’s car beadily.

“Would you prefer to ride in my briefcase?” Beau asked coolly.

“You know, I think I would,” Lucius shot back dully.

Rose gave a full, happy laugh.

“Beau?”

“Yes, Rose?” said Beau.

The little Hufflepuff flung out her arms and hugged him tightly around the middle.

“Thank you,” she said warmly. “I think I understand why you didn’t want us to see *Titanic*, but... I’m really glad we did. It wasn’t really a *happy* movie – I was sad and upset a lot of the time – but even though it hurt a lot, it felt really good, seeing Rose get through it. Even though everything was so horrible...she survived, and she moved on, and she was happy. ...Maybe that’s why Cho liked it so much too.”

Beau’s eyes welled up with traces of tears as he brought a large hand through Rose’s ginger-enchanted curls fondly.

“...I’m glad you liked it,” he said at last.

His lips curled up in a warm smile as he looked at the others.

“Come on – let’s go home.”

Somewhere far away a Ministry employee with sunken-in eyes dressed in scarlet robes paid an unplanned house call to the Montmercy home. He knew that the master of the house would not be home for another hour, so this likely would be his only chance.

The door of the pearl white cottage opened, to reveal the Senior Undersecretary’s dark-haired wife, Antoinette. Her eyes narrowed coldly upon the stranger.

“Yes?”

The skull-eyed Bulgarian looked up at her solemnly.

“I have a note in my possession I think you might find interesting.”

He handed a restaurant receipt to her. Antoinette flipped it over, reading the contents critically. Her eyes widened.

“Where did you get this?” she demanded.

“My coworkers and I, we ran into some Guilders on our rounds,” the skull-eyed man said softly. “They protected the Muggles from us – we are the same as Death Eaters, in their eyes, after all – but one of the Muggles in their care noticed that I was deliberately sabotaging my coworkers and passed this to me.”

Antoinette’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “*Sabotaging* them?”

She squinted at the young man’s face.

“...Who *are* you?”

The skull-eyed man’s expression didn’t shift. “You needn’t know details, *Gospoja* Montmercy – just know that when the Guilders raid Azkaban, I shall be ready to liberate your son.”

“You know where he is?!” gasped Antoinette. She seized hold of the man’s arm, yanking him forward. “Where is he?! *Where*?!”

“Imprisoned,” the skull-eyed man said solemnly. “Dolohov bid that I take him to a secret location, so I have seen it, but I dare not expose it. As of now the security is so tight that anyone would be caught if they even *tried* to breach it, and even if they somehow *did* escape, your husband and Dolohov would invariably lock it up so tightly that no one would ever escape again. But, with proper planning, with proper back-up...and, as I mentioned, with the proper *distraction*...I will be able to free all of those held captive. The Ministry will have little reason to pay attention to their *pet project* if all of their adult inmates are suddenly free and standing on their doorstep.”

“How can I help?” Antoinette asked immediately. “What do I have to do?”

“Say nothing of this to anyone,” the skull-eyed man said sharply, his eyes flashing. “The last thing I need is for anyone to suspect me. Even associating with other resistance members or telling my loved ones of my activities would be too risky, now that I’ve earned Dolohov’s trust.”

As he turned to go, he spoke over his shoulder, his lips touched by a small smirk.

“...Still, you may...try to *distract* your husband, as much as you are able. I am thinking that the less he focuses on the Saeva Vard, the less he’ll visit it, and the less he visits, the less he’ll notice my *own* visits, and the notes that I am taking.”

Antoinette nodded grimly. “Understood.”

“Much obliged.”

With a quiet *crack*, the skull-eyed Auror disappeared just as swiftly as he’d arrived.

Chapter End Notes

For the record, the author likes both *Titanic* and *Anastasia* a lot. And yeah, they did really premiere in the U.K. around the same time!

Malfoy Manor, Revised

March 21, 1998

Hi, everyone,

Beau, Trudy, Mr. Malfoy, Noel and I were actually able to go to the movies the other day! We decided on Titanic, thanks to your recommendation, Cho: it was really sad and hard to watch sometimes, but it really was beautiful. Even Mr. Malfoy was impressed – I reckon he had trouble figuring out how they did all those special effects.

Guys, I know it's been really hard lately, but please remember, things will never get better if we give up hope! We have to keep fighting and keep surviving, no matter what! If we do, I'm sure we'll see the end of the rain, and there'll be rainbows on the other side!

Love you all!

xoxoxo

Rose

You're so right, Rose: I'm sure the rainbows will come again, once this storm is through...and I'm sure those colors will look even more radiant, after all of the gray we've been through.

Hang in there, everyone!

Love,

Hannah

Rose,

I'm glad you liked the movie! You're right, it was really sad, but I think that's what made the ending so empowering. I'm so glad that Rose (the character, I mean) didn't let her grief destroy her.

One of the songs Amanda sings as Dorothy has a line sort of like what you're talking about:

“If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow, why oh why can’t I?”

And isn’t that so true? We all have the potential to fill the world with light and color – you’ve always been so good at that, Rose...

Love,

Cho

March 23, 1998

Just finished listening to the Potterwatch broadcast. Still no update on the location of the Saeva Ward, but apparently there are some Abraxan sympathizers left at the Ministry who have been tracking down and reprinting old pamphlets. One person even charmed an entire stack of them to fly all over Daily Prophet headquarters and shout the words printed in unison like a thousand identical Howlers.

MB

Also from the broadcast: Bathilda Bagshot, author of History of Magic, was found dead in her house in Godric’s Hollow. It’s so sad knowing that she won’t write any more books...

The next broadcast will be on April 16, and the password is “Mad-Eye.”

Love from

Astoria

March 28, 1998

Here’s my MArch cake for all of you! It’s a bouquet of rEd and yellow roses, made of strawberry and lemon curd and pound cake! It was really difficult carving all of tHe flowers just right, but I’m really Happy with how they tUrned out.

Miss you all sO much!

Kevin

A lovely cake as always, Kevin. Your petals look so light and soft, they could be confused for the real thing.

Spring break is approaching fast, but the mood in the castle has been dreary as ever. The halls are so empty now, thanks to all the students that went underground. The only one who really stands up to the Carrows anymore is Longbottom, so they've been attacking him more than ever. Even so, they seem almost bored by it: they've started trying to bait and hex the Slytherin students too sometimes, just to keep us on our toes.

Please stay safe, everyone. You are always in my thoughts.

Love from

Daphne

April 1, 1998

In honor of April Fool's Day, I snatched all of Dennis's bucket hats out of his closet and put them all over the house, so that everything from the showerhead to the fridge to the doorknobs look like they're wearing them. (I've always thought Dennis looks really dumb when he wears those hats.) Here are some pictures I took – yeah, I know drawing faces on everything was a little over-the-top, but hey, it'll all come off easily enough, and I did laugh a lot while drawing them!

Cheers!

Colin

Easter break was generally downplayed at Hogwarts. Often students would choose to simply stay at school those two weeks so they could study for their exams, as OWL and NEWT students would have less than a month to prepare once the holiday was over. This year, however, no students remained at Hogwarts for the Easter holidays, unless they were among the group secretly hidden away in the Room of Requirement.

Draco had been looking forward to the Easter holidays. Of course his “home” hadn’t been the most comforting or warm place as of late, given it was now being used as the Death Eaters’ headquarters, but he really had missed his mother and wanted to be there for her. Not receiving any letters from her the last four months had been difficult – usually he’d shared correspondence with his parents constantly, though admittedly back in the olden days it had often involved him complaining to them about “stupid Potter.”

As he walked down the aisle of the Hogwarts Express, he caught sight of Astoria sitting in a compartment with Millicent. When Astoria looked up at the luggage rack, she caught his eye and the two stared at each other through the window for a few seconds; then Astoria’s lips curled up in a very small smile.

Draco was so startled by the softness of her expression that he stood there like a stony-faced deer in the headlights. Then, after a moment, he stiffly raised a hand and gave a halfhearted wave in return. He glanced at Millicent, who’d also turned to look at him at that point, and gave her a curt nod before bustling off up the corridor.

‘Odd that Millicent isn’t sitting with Pansy,’ he thought absently. ‘I wonder if Daphne asked her to sit with her sister, or if she chose to on her own.’

He shrugged.

‘Either way it doesn’t bother me any. At least there’ll be someone to mind little Greengrass and make sure she stays out of trouble...’

As Draco reached the back half of the train, the door opened and Pansy poked her head out. At the sight of him, her expression brightened, and she beckoned him over.

“Over here, Draco!”

The young Death Eater sidled up to her. When she flung her arms around him and kissed his cheek, he didn’t respond, his eyes drawn away back over his shoulder at the hallway he’d come down.

“Train’s even emptier than before,” he murmured stiffly.

Pansy looked up at his face and then down the hall, her expression a little uncomfortable. “Well, sure – suppose it’d *have* to be...”

She shrugged off the grim air as quickly as she could, putting on her best attempt at her usual confidence.

“...But hey, with all of the blood traitors gone, there’s more room for us! Come on...”

She led Draco into the compartment so he could sit down. Across from them were Daphne and Zabini. Daphne was skimming through her Herbology textook, while Zabini kept his focus on the window. Even as Draco and Pansy came into the compartment, he chose to merely watch their reflections in the glass as opposed to turn around to look at them.

Draco and Pansy sat down. Pansy tried to coax Draco to lean on her, but Draco wasn’t really in the mood. Finally he pacified her by bringing an arm up to rest on the back of the seat so that Pansy could lean against him if she so chose. The action surprised Pansy, but after a moment she seemed to have convinced herself that she was happy about it.

The train began to move, and the Slytherins’ compartment filled with an unusual silence. It was rare that any compartment Draco sat in ever lacked conversation – normally he’d never let it lapse, and in the last two years, Pansy had always wrangled it out of everyone in his stead. But it seemed like neither Daphne nor Zabini really wanted to talk. Draco always hated silence – it made him feel uneasy and jittery, like he had to make some sort of noise or do something that would disrupt the eerie emptiness vibrating through his ears. In this occasion, however, he had no idea how to break it.

Pansy, disconcerted by her friends’ distance, broke the silence first.

“Seems Millicent must’ve gotten lost somewhere,” she said, glancing at the door with a frown. “Maybe I should go look for her...”

Daphne’s dark eyes flickered over her book at Pansy, but she didn’t speak. Draco guessed that she had wanted to say something but decided against it.

“Millicent’s fine,” Draco said lowly. “I saw her sitting somewhere else.”

Pansy looked startled. “What? Why?”

Draco shrugged. “Who knows?”

Pansy made as if to get up, but Draco pulled her back down.

“Leave it,” he said firmly, trying to sound as dull as he might have in the past but not quite managing it. “Let her sit where she wants.”

Pansy’s frown deepened as her gaze lingered on the door. Then she slowly settled back down into her seat, her eyebrows knitting together over her eyes.

“...Whatever,” she said, her tone forcefully uncaring. “It’s her loss anyway, if she doesn’t sit with us. Who else is she going to sit with, anyway?”

Zabini’s head tilted slightly, his eyes returning to Pansy’s reflection in the glass.

“So you don’t care that she’s not here?” he challenged her.

“Not in the slightest,” Pansy scoffed.

Draco, Daphne, and Zabini looked unconvinced, but none of them seemed to know how to respond. Pansy, still unnerved by the silence, tried again to fuel some conversation.

“Mother and I will have to go shopping on break – pick up some new dress robes...you know, for our graduation ceremony. Do you reckon they’ll care much about color?”

“Not if it’s conservative,” Daphne replied without looking up from her textbook.

“Yes, but do you reckon pink would be too cheery?” Pansy persisted. “I thought a pink trim would really suit a set of dark violet chiffon...”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” said Daphne, and there was enough finality to her tone that seemed to indicate she was finished with the conversation.

Pansy looked around at her disinterested friends both looking away from her, her expression almost resembling a child left adrift at a train station. She looked at Draco, her eyes rippling with hurt and confusion. Not knowing what to say, he turned away. Her face started to fill with a kind of tempered frustration.

“...What’s *wrong* with all of you?” she demanded. “You’re acting like someone died or something!”

“Quite a few have, Pansy,” Daphne reminded her softly.

Pansy mouthed wordlessly for a moment, baffled.

“Well, yes, but...nobody we knew or cared about, right?”

Even though she said this, it seemed like she was grasping at straws. Zabini, however, glanced over his shoulder at her for the first time.

“Not that we know of,” he said grimly. “We haven’t heard anything about Tracey since she ran away. How do you know *she’s* not dead?”

The mention of Tracey made Pansy flinch, but she tried to obscure the pain from her face.

“That was *her* choice!” she burst out defensively. “She shouldn’t have run away in the first place – if she’d just accepted what the Ministry – ”

Zabini turned around very sharply. “Just knelt down and groveled, then?”

Everyone was startled by the sharpness of his tone.

“Blaise...” murmured Pansy, stunned.

Zabini looked away, his eyes flaring with a bizarre fire none of them had ever seen before.

“Don’t you have any pride?” he spat coldly at the floor. “Are you really so easily satisfied? We were supposed to be at the top of this new world – treated with the respect *owed* us, as Purebloods! We were supposed to be nobility, above the rabble – and now? Now that the blood traitors and Mudbloods have been weeded out, the Carrows have decided to have at *us* too! Us loyal *Purebloods*!”

Zabini’s outburst had surprised Draco, but once his housemate spoke so much of his high expectations, it started to make sense. Draco remembered how long it’d taken for Zabini to join their group – really, it wasn’t until fourth year that they’d spent any time together, as Zabini had always been such a lone wolf. It was only after Potter was chosen as the second Triwizard Champion and Draco had sold Zabini one of his “*Potter Stinks*” badges that they’d really talked at all. Before that...well, Zabini was just too proud to associate with his housemates – perhaps, Draco now considered, too proud to even *consider* wanting to spend time with anyone else. If there was any trait of Slytherin that Zabini had always embodied, it was pride.

Daphne and Pansy exchanged an uncomfortable look.

“Blaise,” Pansy started hesitantly, “just because Amycus cast the Cruciatus Curse on you that time doesn’t mean – I mean, really, it’s nothing *half* as bad as what he’s done to – ”

“Are you seriously trying to *justify* it?!” snapped Zabini, and his eyes flared at her. “I’m a *Pureblood* – I have never said a single word defending a Mudblood in my life! And yet I somehow deserve being treated like Abbott or Longbottom?!”

“Maybe you just weren’t...voicing your support enough,” Pansy attempted halfheartedly. “I mean, after all...this is what we all *wanted*, isn’t it? The Mudbloods are gone, the blood traitors are going – ”

“**BULLSHIT!**”

Zabini punched the back of his and Daphne’s seat, catapulting himself to his feet violently.

“Having all of our private mail intercepted and read by complete strangers? Being placed into arranged marriages? Having to cower at our teachers’ feet?! ***This*** is what we wanted?! We were

supposed to be great – to earn our Pureblood families their proper glory, like the kind they had in the olden days! But instead we have to bend and scrape before the ones in charge – like *we're* the rabble – and simply be okay with it because *at least we're alive – at least our family's alive* – we shouldn't *deign* to want anything more than that! We act like the Death Eaters winning has made things better...but has it?! *Has* it?! We were supposed to be stronger...but we're more scared than ever!"

Draco, Daphne, and Pansy stared at Zabini. He was panting hard and his eyes darted around the compartment, almost half-mad, as a new, bizarre glint took hold. Draco recognized the glint at once – it was realization: the kind that could shake one's entire worldview and make it crumble.

"...Montmercy was right," Zabini murmured in a voice so hollow and quiet it made him almost resemble the Bloody Baron. "When they're done with the Mudbloods and the Squibs...they'll go after who's left."

The other three stared at him, not knowing at all what to say. Horror and nausea spiraled around in Zabini's wide eyes for a long moment; then, in an instant, he'd fled the compartment, barreling away up the hall.

"Blaise!" Pansy cried after him. "*Blaise!*"

But he did not respond or even look back.

Draco did not see Zabini again that day, not even on the platform. Pansy had tried to act like nothing was wrong, saying that he'd probably gone and sat with Crabbe and Goyle and that they'd see him after break, but Draco knew she was lying to herself as well as them.

Draco bid Pansy and Daphne goodbye on the platform, pulling his trunk along behind him as he walked into the crowd. At long last, on the other side, he caught sight of a willowy, pale woman with long, white-blond hair dressed in eggshell blue.

"*Mother!*"

Narcissa Malfoy turned, and in an instant, she and Draco barreled through the crowd and threw their arms around each other. Tears leaked from Narcissa's eyes as she stroked her son's hair.

Draco closed his eyes, fighting back his own tears, as he squeezed her tightly.

Narcissa and Draco returned to Malfoy Manor by Side-Along Apparition, arriving just outside the front gates. They took their sweet time walking up the grounds, talking and catching up after all of the months apart without being able to write to each other.

“The Dark Lord has been leaving the country more and more frequently,” explained Narcissa. “Even though the rumors are purposefully inconsistent, so as to keep his enemies on their toes, it’s clear he’s restless. And frankly, given what I’ve heard about the state of the Ministry, I’m unsurprised.”

“What do you mean?” asked Draco.

Narcissa gave something of a demure roll of her eyes.

“Well, for starters, the fall-out from Etienne’s daughter’s wedding. At the reception she accused her father of murdering three people in a mad rage. Antonin Dolohov tried to spin the whole thing as hysteria and brought her into custody, but her breakdown has shaken many of those who still had their heads in the sand regarding the Ministry’s new regime. More and more people are having trouble keeping their rose-colored glasses intact. Then there’s the republishing of old Abraxan pamphlets. Sympathizers have been tracking down copies so they can reprint them en masse. Uric Cuffe has gone out of his way to try to smear their author in the press as nothing but a pretentious child...but as you can imagine, him bullying a girl half his age and presumed dead hasn’t gone over so well. Then there’s the running of the Ministry itself...it’s completely falling apart! All of the promotions Pius Thicknesse arranged have only come back to bite him, as each position was selected based on political loyalties and blood status as opposed to merit or experience. Diagon Alley has become so unsafe that just about every store has closed their doors. Obliviators are quitting in droves because of how much they’ve been overworked with no additional pay. Funds have been slashed for the Department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures so as to support other projects, and as a result dragons and giants are running amok in the countryside. Not to mention the whole mess with the Quidditch World Cup...”

Draco had been so overwhelmed by the flood of new, bizarre information, but the mention of Quidditch made him instantly straighten up. “What?”

Narcissa smirked coldly.

“The Ministry of Magic has claimed that senior Ministry officials received a series of threats originating from outside the country,” she sneered, “and so in the name of security, the British Isles will not be hosting the World Cup this year.”

Draco’s mouth fell open.

“Are they *insane*? We’ve *always* organized it! Even when it’s held abroad, we’ve always made the arrangements!”

Narcissa’s smirk broadened. “The rest of the Wizarding World is *quite* upset by it.”

At long last they approached the gate, which became as translucent as smoke as soon as they approached. The door for the house likewise swung open for them, and they entered the Manor, Narcissa bringing an arm around Draco’s as they walked through the entrance hall. Almost as soon as they arrived, they were met with the sound of horrible, prolonged screaming from somewhere near the back of the house.

Bellatrix had been lounging in one of the stiff-backed armchairs in the parlor, one leg draped unceremoniously over the arm. At the sight of Narcissa and Draco, however, she straightened up slightly.

“There you are, Cissy! Where have you been?”

“I had to go pick up Draco from King’s Cross,” Narcissa replied demurely.

“Oh yes – you did mention that,” said Bellatrix disinterestedly. “Afternoon, Draco-kins.”

Draco tried not to cringe. “Hello, Aunt Bellatrix.”

Another bloodcurdling, mad scream cut at the air, making Draco flinch.

“Who’s that in the dining room?” he asked, his gray eyes drifting down the hall.

“Thorfinn Rowle,” murmured Narcissa.

“Utter fool,” Bellatrix sneered. “This morning he came strutting in here, claiming he’d caught Harry Potter –”

Draco gave a horrible start.

“ – hiding out as a Muggle in Surrey. Looked quite a bit like the boy, I admit...but as soon as Rowle arrived, he summoned the Dark Lord here with his Mark, and the Dark Lord knew instantly that it wasn’t Potter – it was just a filthy Muggle. So he dealt with the refuse, and now he’s dealing with Rowle. I would’ve loved to do it myself,” she said with an airy sigh, and the sadism in her voice left Draco in no doubt of her convictions. “But the Dark Lord had no interest in sharing.”

Narcissa glanced at Draco as he wordlessly looked back up at the hall and, without skipping a beat, lead him toward the staircase.

“Come, Draco – let’s go unpack your things.”

And so they quietly and quickly swept upstairs to Draco’s room, trying to block out the sound of Rowle’s tortured screams.

It wasn’t until Draco came down for lunch that Rowle’s cries finally came to an end. Draco stopped at the base of the staircase, glancing over his shoulder; then, at the sound of quick footsteps, he quickly slipped around the corner and out of sight, just before Lord Voldemort appeared out of the dining room. Draco watched his black-robed frame depart, his gray eyes locked on the back of his hairless, skull-like head as he whirled on Bellatrix, who had bustled over eagerly as if to greet him.

“Dispose of the corpse,” he told her coldly. “When Rowle’s able to stand, send him back to the front.”

Without skipping a beat, he turned and swept away out the door. Bellatrix looked faintly putout by his dismissive instructions, and once Voldemort had left, she vented her frustrations out on Wormtail, who was standing just a few feet away.

“Well, go on!” she bellowed at him, getting right up in his face with a demonic glower and making him recoil. “Take that filth out of our house!”

Wormtail looked like he really wanted to tell Bellatrix to take a hike, but he was much too cowardly to do so, so he reluctantly sidled up down the hall, taking out his wand as he went.

Draco closed his eyes and turned away as he tried to calm his pounding heart. Then, with a deep breath, he headed into the drawing room.

Not long later, while Draco and Narcissa were eating their cucumber sandwiches, a shaky, plodding set of *THUMPS* caught their ear. When they looked up, they saw Thorfinn Rowle dragging himself step by step down the hall outside the drawing room.

The Death Eater who had shot Killing Curses at random through the halls of Hogwarts school and taken such satisfaction in killing Arjuna, Roger, and Eddie was now as hollow and empty as a wandering phantom, with his features stretched and contorted beyond recognition. Horrible blackened veins popped sickeningly out of his skin, he seemed unable to close his mouth completely, and when he turned to look at Draco and Narcissa, his eyes were so wide and bloodshot that they made him look like an Inferi.

He didn't say a word as he slid out of sight, and about ten minutes later one of the five white candles on the chandelier over Narcissa and Draco's heads went out, signaling that he had gone.

The next week, for the most part, was dreary but quiet. Every day a Death Eater or two would pass through, sometimes to share news and sometimes to discuss Ministry matters. One day Pius Thicknesse even stopped by, but because the Minister was still under the Imperius Curse he didn't talk at all. Dolohov had been his “guardian” during that visit, and even though he spoke more than Thicknesse, he had some trouble opening the side of his mouth. His left cheek was scarred over, as if it had been ripped open and then sealed back together haphazardly.

“Last month Dolohov had a possible lead on Potter's location,” Narcissa murmured to her son in explanation, “but it turned out to be a dead end.”

Draco glanced at her out the side of his eye. “...The Dark Lord wants Potter more than ever, doesn't he?”

“Of course,” said Narcissa. Draco frowned in confusion, and she explained with a wryer smile, “There’s no point in fighting if you don’t think there’s a chance of winning. If rebellion is like a fire...well, then hope is like the air. And if one wanted to suffocate that flame, one would have to snuff out all hope.”

The cold silence that dominated the Manor made Draco long all the more for the old days, when his parents would spoil him with a shopping trip to Diagon Alley on a whim. Still, as Narcissa reminded him, any activity that might happen at the Manor now would likely not be of the good variety...and, on the afternoon of April 9th, those words proved prophetic.

Draco and Narcissa had been playing Wizard Chess in the upstairs parlor when the chandelier overheard suddenly lit up. The four white candles that Draco had gotten used to – the ones representing the two prisoners in the cellar, Bellatrix, and Wormtail – were suddenly joined by eight more, lighting up almost the entire bottom tier.

The two Malfoys exchanged a look and, in an instant, got up from their game and immediately bustled out of the room and down the hall. They’d just reached the top of the grand staircase when there suddenly was a loud **BANG!**

Narcissa and Draco both ran down the stairs toward the drawing room. They entered just in time to see Bellatrix bearing down on Fenrir Greyback, who she had bound with a fiery red, rope-like spell and slammed down into the floor. Two other men lay unconscious on the ground, just in front of a set of five bound prisoners.

Narcissa strode into the drawing room, heading right for her sister, but Draco halted mid-step in the doorframe when he saw whom Greyback and his Snatchers had captured.

One was a goblin Draco knew he’d once seen behind the desk at Gringotts, but the other four were human and Draco’s age. *Exactly* Draco’s age, in fact...because even if they all looked worse for the wear, Draco could still recognize their faces.

The first prisoner was dark-skinned with the beginnings of whiskers prickling at his chin, cheeks, and upper lip. He was wearing a red jacket the exact same color as the Quidditch uniform Draco had seen him wearing the previous year and his hands were covered in ink – of course, Draco recalled, Dean Thomas was an artist: he’d drawn pictures of Potter before.

The second was a woman with bushy brown hair rebelling against the plait it had been forced into.

Her bound, tanned hands were trembling. Even though her hair wasn't out and free like it normally was, Hermione Granger was just as scared and pale as she'd been when the Inquisitorial Squad caught her and her friends breaking into Umbridge's office.

The third was pale, freckled, and bruised with shaggy, shockingly ginger hair and a gangling frame. His lip was bleeding freely as if he'd been in a fight. Draco's own words came back to him, as well as the memory of Ron Weasley's flushed, angry face upon hearing them.

"Think my name's funny, do you? No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford."

And there, just behind Weasley...

Draco's heart gave a spasm of terror.

The figure's face was inflamed and pink, with one eye almost completely swollen shut, his lip protruding unnaturally, and his chin as round as a golf ball, and the glasses clunkily shoved onto his nose didn't fit him at all. His jaw was shadowed with dark stubble that matched his messy, shoulder-length hair. He was skinnier and tanner and his face was distorted beyond recognition, but it didn't matter. As soon as the last prisoner and Draco locked eyes, Draco knew immediately who it was.

"Where did you get this?!" Bellatrix hissed at Greyback furiously, holding up the ruby-encrusted hilt of a beautiful sword.

"Are you mad?!" yelled Greyback, gnashing his teeth as he struggled against Bellatrix's superior magic.

"This sword is meant to be in my vault at Gringotts! *Where did you get it?!*"

"They had it in their tent! We found it on the girl when we caught 'em!"

With a sharp wave of her wand, Bellatrix released him. The werewolf sprang back to his feet, prowling behind an armchair to put some distance between him and Bellatrix.

“Bella,” Narcissa said urgently, “what’s going on?”

Bellatrix whirled on her sister, her face very pale and her dark eyes so wide and mad that it was frightening.

“Cissy...we have a very serious problem,” she said lowly.

Narcissa looked at the prisoners too and gave a start.

“Are those...?”

“The Weasley boy and the Mudblood, yes,” Bellatrix said dismissively, her eyes boring into the sword in her hand. “And that one might be Potter...but we cannot call the Dark Lord yet – I must find out – I must make sure – ”

Bellatrix’s head shot up and her insane black curls were tossed backward in the movement.

“Greyback! Take the boys downstairs. Leave the goblin...and the Mudblood. We’ll see if she has anything to say for herself...”

With a reluctant scowl, Greyback seized the ropes around Ron and Dean in one of his massive, clawed hands, lifting them both up off the ground. Ron immediately threw himself forward against his bonds, his face blanched with horror.

“*No!* You can have me – keep me!”

Bellatrix slapped him across the face, tossing his head to the side with such force that the *SMACK* echoed through the room.

“If she dies under questioning, I’ll take you next, blood traitor,” Bellatrix spat coldly.

Greyback snatched Harry’s bonds in his other hand and with little effort picked him up too, carrying the three prisoners effortlessly out of the room even as they struggled. Draco watched him

go, his gray eyes unable to make contact with any of the prisoners and instead cowardly skirting around Greyback's hands and back.

"Draco, move this *scum* outside," said Bellatrix coldly, kicking the two unconscious Snatchers idly out of the way so she could better reach Hermione. "If you don't have the stomach to finish them off, leave them for me."

"Don't you dare speak to Draco like –" Narcissa started, but Draco hurried forward, taking hold of her shoulder and squeezing.

With a swallow the young Death Eater did as Bellatrix said, levitating the two figures out of the room with his wand. Although he'd kept his face as stony as he could, however, Draco's mind was whirling as he headed for the entrance hall.

What could he do? *They'd caught Potter*. Potter was now trapped at Death Eater headquarters and would only remain alive until the Dark Lord arrived – and Bellatrix only intended to wait until she found out how he and his friends had gotten into her vault –

"He is only assured of our loyalty because he believes our fear is stronger than any shred of hope we might harbor."

The Dark Lord wouldn't just kill Potter. He would flaunt his death in the Wizarding World's face – display his corpse like a macabre trophy. Potter had become such a symbol to the resistance against the Death Eaters that his death would be crippling. The Order of the Phoenix almost lost all of its strength after the loss of Dumbledore...if Potter was gone too, who knows how devastating of a blow it would be?

"If rebellion is like a fire...well, then hope is like the air. And if one wanted to suffocate that flame, one would have to snuff out all hope."

From the time Draco had first met him, Harry Potter had always been lucky. He'd always managed to sneak out of trouble, to slip out of danger, and to save the day, all without putting in much effort. Even though Potter had no parents, had been raised by Muggles, and had a Mudblood mother, he'd won every Quidditch match against Slytherin, won Gryffindor every House Cup, and earned more friends and supporters than Draco ever had. He was so lucky that he could even defeat and escape from the wizard that the Malfoys had believed would save the Wizarding World. It was the thing Draco resented most about Potter from the beginning and why he'd only resented Potter more and more as time went by. But now...now, in his family's own house...had Potter's luck finally run out? Had he finally found himself in a kind of danger he couldn't wind his way out of?

*“Whether he’s that ‘Chosen One’ or not...he’s the only person on Earth who probably has enough dumb luck to face the Dark Lord...and actually **win**.”*

“*CRUCIO!*” shouted Bellatrix’s voice.

As Draco reached the entrance hall, a terrible scream echoed out from the drawing room. Shutting his eyes tight, he tossed the two prone forms of the Snatchers haphazardly out into the courtyard and turned away, closing the door behind him.

Down in the cellar, the prisoners – Dean, Harry, Ron, Luna, and Ollivander – could hear the pained screams of Hermione coming from upstairs. Ron writhed against the ropes binding him, his face contorted with pain.

“HERMIONE! *HERMIONE!*”

He closed his eyes and bolted forward, trying to Disapparate.

“Ron, you can’t Apparate without a wand,” Dean told him in a strained voice, his face also contorted with anxiety.

Trying to block out the horrible sound, Harry tried to focus on escape as best he could. Luna was trying to cut open the ropes binding Harry with a rusty nail, but because it wasn’t a real blade, it wasn’t working that well.

“We’ve used this nail whenever we’ve had to break anything,” she explained, her voice quite level considering the urgency of the situation. “Shame it’s not a little sharper...”

Her round light blue eyes swept up to the roof in response to Hermione’s screams, narrowing slightly as she returned her focus to Harry’s bonds with a bit more strength.

“Do you have anything with you that might help us get out of here?” she asked Harry.

Harry racked his brain. He didn't think there was anything that could help – the Snatchers had dumped out all of their personal belongings, taking only things that they thought might have any monetary value. Even Ron's scarlet scrapbook, which they'd fortunately been unable to read, had been ripped apart when the Snatchers saw nothing but empty pages. All Harry had now were the Snitch Dumbledore had left him and the shard of Sirius's old mirror, which were both in his pockets.

Harry's green eyes widened.

"Luna, in my left pocket, there's a piece of glass – you could use that to cut our bonds!"

"Oh yes, that'd work much better," Luna answered dreamily.

Leaning over Harry's lap, she reached around in his pocket until she found the piece of mirror. As she held it up, Harry once again thought he saw a familiar blue eye in its depths before Luna brought it down to his bonds and she slashed at them with new vigor. In seconds she'd chopped one of the strands in half, which made the rest unwind around Harry in a heap.

"Yes!" cried Harry.

Luna crawled over on her knees to Dean and Ron, cutting them loose too. As soon as he was free, Ron barreled over to the door of the cellar and slammed up against it with all of his strength. It didn't budge, but Ron whammed it again in a vain attempt to force it open.

"We've got to get up there!" he said, grabbing hold of the window bars and shaking them desperately. His eyes welled up with tears of anguish as Hermione's cries once again bounced off the walls.

"It's no use," said Ollivander sadly. He was too frail to stand on his own, so he used the wall to steady himself. "I've been down here for months, and I've tried everything. That lock is unbreakable – I think only one with the proper magical clearance could open it..."

"Gah!"

At that moment, something small and white leapt through the bars on the window at the top of the cellar door, soaring through the air past Ron. It landed primly on the stone floor, blinking up at each of the prisoners with gray-colored eyes.

Harry's breath caught in his throat.

"*Malfoy?*" he whispered, barely daring to believe it.

The white Turkish Angora cat, in an instant, grew and melded into the pale, slender shape of Draco, who immediately shot forward with his hand warningly over his mouth.

"Not a word out of you, Potter," he hissed.

He shot an anxious glance over his shoulder at the window he'd just leapt through.

"There's not much time, so don't interrupt me," he said very quickly and sharply. "When the Dark Lord made Malfoy Manor his headquarters, he enchanted this cellar and its entrance. Only a Death Eater can open this door...but the door remembers everything, so if I open it right before you escape, then everyone will *know* I opened it. Therefore I'll need to have *Wormtail* do it. It's no skin off my nose if he gets blamed."

He took a Wildfire Whizbang out of his pocket. Ron was shocked to see one of his brothers' products in Draco's hands, but Draco cut him off before he could say anything.

"I'm going to lure him down here and make him think you're trying to break out. He'll have to open the door to investigate. When that happens, you – " he nodded to Harry, Ron, Luna, and Dean, " – will have to overpower him. Stun him as soon as you get his wand off him. Then you all need to get out. Take the hallway at the top of the stairs to the right, and it'll wind around past the dining hall. Make another right at the grandfather clock, and you'll be near the entrance hall. Get outside that main gate and you can Disapparate. As soon as you leave the grounds, the chandeliers overheard will tell everyone inside that you're gone, so you *have* to disappear as soon as you get outside. Understand?"

Harry was stunned. Of all of the people he could've expected to come to his rescue, he never in a million years would *ever* have thought it'd be Draco Malfoy. Yet here he was, not just sticking his neck out by offering them a distraction, but also by giving them instructions on how to avoid capture.

“What about Hermione?” Ron said at once.

Draco’s lips came together in a displeased grimace. “You’ll have to leave her.”

“*What?*” said Ron furiously.

“Sorry, but I’m not dueling Bellatrix,” said Draco coolly. “I rather like the idea of *surviving* this War, if at all possible.”

“So you’ll help save *our* lives, but not hers?” Dean challenged him, his dark eyes narrowing. “Let me guess, a *Muggle-born’s* life isn’t worth saving to you, Malfoy?”

“You twat!” Draco snapped. “Granger and the goblin are all that’s keeping Bellatrix from summoning the Dark Lord here and killing you all right now! You need to get out while you still can.”

Harry took a step forward, his gaze boring into Draco’s harshly.

“You said yourself that Bellatrix will know as soon as we leave the grounds,” he said coldly. “If we were to Disapparate without Hermione and Griphook, we’d be sentencing them to death.”

“So you’ll sacrifice everyone else in this cellar for *their* sake?” Draco said sharply. “Are you really that stupid?”

“I’d say staying in a house with Bellatrix Lestrange when you have the chance to get out of here is the *really* stupid thing,” Harry retorted.

Draco’s jaw clenched. “Forcing my mother and myself to go into hiding after all the effort we’ve put in to *not* cut and run? Unlikely.”

Harry’s face grew a little more serious. “Malfoy, if you get caught for helping us – ”

“I won’t, that’s why I’m framing Wormtail.”

Before Harry could say anything else, Draco interrupted him.

“Don’t you *dare* try to ask me to come with you, Potter. I’m not helping you for your sake – I have my own reasons – and I don’t need you to try to ‘*rescue*’ Mother and me from our circumstances. If you *really* want to be of use, then you’ll get the hell out of here and never get close to getting caught again.”

Harry’s green eyes narrowed as he considered Draco’s face carefully.

“We’d appreciate your distraction, Malfoy,” he said quietly after a moment, “but I’m sorry, we’re not leaving without Hermione.”

The two glared at each other for another long moment. Then, at long last, Draco exhaled heatedly, turning on his heel and heading for the door.

“Bloody heroic prat,” he snarled under his breath.

Despite his dismissive posture, he tossed the Wildfire Whizbang over his head, phased into his cat form, and leapt up and out of the cellar door window just in time for the flare to start blasting around the room in a ruckus.

Somehow everything turned out all right. Ron, Dean, Luna, and Harry (now no longer puffy-faced) had burst into the drawing room and prevented Bellatrix from killing Hermione. Bellatrix and Greyback (with some reluctant help from Narcissa and Draco) had managed to overpower them and were about to take them, Ollivander, and Griphook back into custody when all of a sudden, out of nowhere, Dobby the house elf appeared. He brought the chandelier crashing down, and the Death Eaters and Narcissa had to leap out of the way as it shattered, sending large shards of crystal flying through the air. The distraction allowed Hermione to steal Bellatrix’s wand.

Harry landed on the other side of the chaise longue just a few feet from where Draco lay in a heap, blood dripping down from his hairline. Feeling a pang of concern despite himself, Harry crawled forward.

“Malfoy?”

Malfoy opened one eye.

“Back off, Potty,” he growled.

The familiar nickname felt strange coming out of Draco’s mouth, but it actually made Harry smirk in dark amusement.

“You’re alive, then,” he said coolly, though he clearly was relieved.

“You too,” sneered Draco. “You and your stupid luck, Potter.”

He brought his wand hand up to his moist forehead.

“...Am I *bleeding*?” he mumbled absently, almost stunned. It was rare that he ever got injured: the only other times he’d ever remembered bleeding before this was when Hagrid’s hippogriff had clawed his arm and of course when Harry and he had their confrontation in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. His head was spinning and it hurt like hell.

Colorful spells collided overhead. Making his mind up quickly, Draco immediately dropped his arm and went limp, letting his grip on his wand slacken.

“Take my wand.”

“What?” said Harry, taken aback.

“I’m unconscious,” Draco shot back dully as he glared at him. “Take my wand while I’m out cold and fight your way out.”

Harry hesitated. “...Are you sure?”

“You’re useless without a wand,” said Draco, his voice firm despite its callousness. “I’ll just swipe one of the wands Greyback stole from you lot, after you’re gone. Now take it.”

He closed his eyes and went still. After another moment, Draco felt Harry tentatively slide his hawthorn wand out of his grip.

“Thank you,” the Boy Who Lived said so softly that Draco barely heard him.

And with a rustle of movement, Harry was gone.

Draco didn’t move a muscle until long after all of the blasts and voices had died down and Bellatrix screamed in fury at Harry Potter’s miraculous escape.

After Draco pretended to come to, it was decided that no one present – Greyback, Narcissa, Bellatrix, or Draco – would ever tell the Dark Lord what had happened that day. If he found out that they’d had the *real* Harry Potter in their custody, only to let him escape, there was no telling how vicious their punishment would be.

Action in America

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 11, 1998

Guys –

Professor Ramsay just stopped by our house with news of Ron – don't worry, he, Harry, and Hermione are okay, but a lot's happened...

Okay, to start with, Ron, Harry, and Hermione ran into some Snatchers two days ago and got captured. Hermione was able to disguise Harry's face with a Stinging Jinx so the Snatchers wouldn't recognize him and of course all three of them used fake names, but the Snatchers were still suspicious. They ripped apart Ron's scrapbook (which, thank goodness, they couldn't read!) and hauled the three of them as well as Dean Thomas and a goblin named Griphook to Malfoy Manor, which apparently is now being used as Death Eater headquarters. They met Bellatrix Lestrangle and Narcissa and Draco Malfoy there, and everyone but Hermione and Griphook were locked in a dungeon downstairs with the other prisoners, Mr. Ollivander the wand-maker and Luna Lovegood.

*Okay, now here's where things get crazy – you want to know how Harry and everyone got out of the dungeon? **Draco Malfoy helped them!** He let off a Wildfire Whizbang downstairs to give them a distraction so they could overpower Peter Pettigrew (the Death Eater who came to investigate) and escape! Ramsay said Pettigrew accidentally died in the struggle, which I think is kind of a shame since I don't reckon Ron or Harry would really want to kill anyone, but Ramsay didn't look too sorry. Anyway, after that, Ron and the others went to go rescue Hermione and Griphook, when who should appear but Dobby? He told Ron the barman at the Hog's Head tipped him off that that they were at Malfoy Manor and needed help – Ron had no idea how the barman could've known that and I don't really either, but Dobby got them all out. Unfortunately Dobby himself wasn't so lucky. Just as he was Disapparating with Harry, Ron, and Hermione, Bellatrix Lestrangle threw a knife at them, and the knife hit Dobby right in the chest. Harry and Ron buried him together along the coast and arranged a small service for him. I feel so terrible for them...I know Dobby was their friend, and he was a really sweet little elf.*

Once everyone got safely to Bill Weasley's house, Ron Disapparated to the Fountain House and asked Professor Ramsay for help. Tana went over to help Bill's wife Fleur heal everyone's injuries, and now she and Ramsay have been helping Ollivander, Luna, and Dean find new hiding places. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Griphook say they'll be moving on soon, but if anything happens, Ron will try to get word to Ramsay so he can keep the rest of us in the loop. Beau, Trudy, Noel, and I were really relieved to hear everything had gone all right – Mr. Malfoy stayed off by himself at a distance at first while Ramsay explained everything, but as soon as Malfoy Manor and his family were brought up, he kind of threw himself across the room and demanded to know every detail. I think what his son did kind of shook him, since it basically means Draco betrayed You-Know-Who, but I don't know if he really was ashamed or upset about it. His face looked so scared and white, but also so soft. I'm thinking Mr. Malfoy might have been so glad to hear anything about Draco at all that he didn't care what kind of news it was.

There's something else I have to share with you all, though – when the Ramsays came over to tell

us all this, I was really surprised, because I haven't seen them in six months, so I hadn't realized –

TANA IS PREGNANT!

Like, SUPER pregnant! I suppose she could have told us when the Ramsays came over for dinner that one time...but yeah, then Kevin needed help, and Tana had to immediately go back out and leave for Glasgow! From what I gather, she and Ramsay have sort of been hitting the ground running ever since, trying to stay two steps ahead of the Ministry and keep as many people underground as possible, so they haven't really had the opportunity to celebrate it as much as they would've liked...but I think Ramsay really is excited. He was coddling Tana the entire time they were over, helping her whenever she got up and making sure she wasn't exerting herself too much.

I love you all so much!

xoxoxo

Rose

Dear Rose,

I'm so, so glad to hear that Luna and Dean are okay! I just told Neville, and he was so excited that he picked me up and swung me around in a circle. I'm so relieved too...I'm glad that Ramsay's helping them and they'll finally be somewhere safe again!

We were also very saddened by the news of Dobby, though. I recruited Susan, Terry, and Anthony to help me make a small memorial for him here in the Room of Requirement, as a thank you for all of his help. I took a picture for you to see – it's not much, but I like how Anthony's painted frame turned out.

I hope you'll be able to send us a picture of the little Ramsay when they arrive, Rose! I'm sure they'll be absolutely adorable!!

Love,

Hannah

Rose,

Your letter was just...Merlin, I don't know where to start. I'm so relieved that Ron and the others are okay and I'm delighted to hear about Tana's pregnancy, but what Malfoy did...

He saved their lives. You realize that, don't you? If Malfoy Manor is Death Eater Headquarters, then You-Know-Who might have strolled through that door at any time – if they'd known they'd had Harry Potter in custody, the Snatchers and Bellatrix would've no doubt called him in a second. If Malfoy hadn't coaxed Pettigrew downstairs and given Ron and the others the chance to overpower him, then they might never have gotten out of there.

It's just...surreal, to think of the guy who betrayed Hogwarts to the Death Eaters – or even before that, that obnoxious, spoiled, blood purist bully who strutted about the school like he owned the place – doing something like that. It wasn't much, I know – it was just a distraction, but...it was still a really decent thing to do.

If you hear anything else of Ron, Rose, let us know. Everyone else, please stay safe.

Love from

Astoria

April 12, 1998

Thanks for the news, Rose! Dennis and I are really glad to hear Dean and Luna are okay, though we both wish the same could be said for Dobby. I'll always remember how he helped us decorate the Room of Requirement with Harry-Potter-themed Christmas baubles before one of our DA meetings. Here's a picture I took – wicked cool, wasn't it?

Later,

Colin

April 14, 1998

Dear Rose,

I'm also very sorry about the loss of Dobby. He was the one to tip us off when Umbridge was about to catch Dumbledore's Army two years ago. If he hadn't been there, we all might have been expelled or worse. I'll always be grateful to him for that, and I'm so glad he was able to get Ron, Harry, and the others to safety. He truly was a very good and brave little house elf.

I admit, when I first read what you said about Draco Malfoy, Rose, I almost didn't believe it. Yes, of course Ramsay helped his father go into hiding, but like Astoria said, this is still the same person who helped the Death Eaters break into Hogwarts! Things have changed so much – I don't

think in a million years I would ever feel relief that Draco Malfoy was around! I can only hope that a shift this big must mean something in the grander sense. If we can find allies in people we once called our enemies, surely that means our enemies' numbers are dwindling?

Tomorrow is Tax Day here in the States, and it's been an absolute nightmare to get everything sorted! Because the MACUSA and the Wizarding World are so completely underground here, we have to pay taxes with official Ministry-fabricated employment and income information so that we don't arouse suspicion with the Muggle – pardon me, No-Maj authorities. (I'm sorry, I don't think I will ever get used to that word!) We fortunately only pay the non-magical government and not also the MACUSA, as witches and wizards here almost all live in Muggle neighborhoods and the MACUSA tend to rely on the Muggle government for infrastructure and the like. I still haven't quite gotten the hang of either American currency, so that doesn't help. American Muggles use this weird paper money that are kind of like British Muggle pounds, but are half as valuable, while American wizards have these gold and rose quartz coins called Sols (which are basically like 1/3 of a Galleon) and Double Sols (which are understandably double that), but the exchange rate between either of those and Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts is a pain and a half to calculate! Fortunately from what I understand from Amanda, tax time is generally stressful for everyone, so at least my anxiety hasn't seemed out of the ordinary to her or anyone else. She's been running behind on her paperwork too thanks to her chaotic rehearsal schedule, so she suggested that we could run by the post office together early tomorrow morning to drop off our forms. I think it might be a good idea: it seems like this kind of stress must be easier to get through with a friend by your side!

If you hear any more news, Rose, please pass it on!

Love,

Cho

The morning of April 15th, Cho checked her purse for her house keys, wallet, tax notes, and wand, before she grabbed her bright blue raincoat, threw it on, and tossed a casual goodbye over her shoulder to her parents before heading out. Strolling over to the door beside her unit, she gave a light knock with the back of her knuckles.

“Coming!” Cho heard a voice call.

After a minute Cho heard a bustle, and the door abruptly swung open to reveal a faintly disheveled Amanda.

Cho's No-Maj friend and up-and-coming Dorothy understudy, Amanda Marion, was something of

a classic beauty – the sort that one would *expect* to find trying to get her big break on Broadway. She was small, pale, and blond with a long, slender face and big blue eyes, and whenever she smiled she let off this almost cherubic air. The visual was complicated, however, by Amanda's voice, which always came out much more grounded and brusque than anyone would have expected from her appearance.

"Crimey, can I just kill Rochester now?" sighed Amanda tiredly. "Pages me at, like, 5 in the mornin' like it's somethin' urgent and when I call him back, he wastes the next *two hours* bendin' my ear 'bout how he might wanna run through Act One's choreography again tonight with the new costume alterations! I mean, if you're fixin' to do it, say so – if you're not, keep your dang thoughts t' yourself!"

Cho smiled sympathetically. "Did you only just shake him off now?"

"You know it, honey," snorted Amanda. "I just hope he didn't go off and bother Lalo and Paul too..."

The blonde pulled on the other sleeve of her army green trench, zipping it up and adjusting the waist tie with an overdramatically weary sigh.

"Anyway...shall we get this show on the road?"

"Sure," said Cho, sighing quietly as well.

The two ladies walked the sixteen blocks to the post office together, chatting idly about their families and their respective work issues. Cho of course had to censor a lot of the names and details surrounding *her* work problems, given that Amanda and her other non-wizard friends and neighbors were under the impression that she worked as a recruiter for a nonprofit physical education program. Fortunately Amanda was the sort to rant about her issues long enough that Cho had plenty of time to come up with a convincing way to reword her replies in "non-magical" terms.

Several men of varying ages catcalled the women along their journey. Cho and Amanda both pointedly ignored all of them but the last one, who actually deigned to offer them both a "seat" on top of him while making pointed hand gestures. Cho wrinkled her nose in utter disgust, while Amanda flashed him a perfectly vicious glare.

"Next time you see some pretty girls, try talkin' outta your mouth instead of your *butt hole*, you

creep!” the blonde snapped over her shoulder, taking hold of Cho’s arm and purposefully leading her quickly across the street.

When they finally reached the post office, a long line of people had already formed in front of the door and wrapped itself around the block. Cho looked at Amanda in dismay.

“I should’ve known,” grumbled Amanda. “This post office is the biggest one around, and they’ve got both the earliest and latest hours. Folks probably thought like we did, tryin’ to get it done before goin’ to work...”

The two women exchanged deflated looks. They’d been about to just grit their teeth and join the back of the line when a voice shouted their names.

“*OYE, CHO! AMANDA!*”

Cho looked up to see a man toward the front of the line waving at them. He was Puerto Rican with an earnest, boyish face brushed with freckles and a long mane of curly black hair, and his eyes were sparkling excitedly.

Cho’s eyes lit up too, and Amanda and she immediately weaved around an elderly woman, a young couple, and a blind man holding a fluffy little dog to get over to him.

“*Lalo!*”

Lalo took hold of Cho’s hand, bringing his other arm around her shoulder to give her an abbreviated hug.

“Wasn’t expectin’ to find *you* here,” said Amanda breezily, her lips teased up smugly.

Lalo laughed. “Well, I...kind of ended up pushing everything off until the last minute, so I figured I should get it done today. James talked my ear off about it until I promised to get it done first thing this morning...”

His face contorted into something of a disgruntled pout, muttering something else in Spanish under

his breath. “*Cabron, él siempre actúa como si yo fuera un niño estúpido....*”

Cho couldn't stop herself from giggling.

“Well, I procrastinated to the end too...so maybe when we're all done here, we can go out for lunch to celebrate?”

Lalo brightened immediately. “Ey, sounds good to me. How about Chinatown? They've got lots of choices.”

“Sure,” said Cho.

“Hope it's okay if I tag along too,” Amanda said with a teasing smirk. “Wouldn't want to be a third wheel to you *lovebirds*.”

“*Amanda*,” hissed Cho, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

Lalo grinned at Cho. She spared an uncomfortable smile in return as she slid her hand out of his.

This sort of teasing wasn't that unusual, really – Amanda had told Cho she thought Lalo liked her ages ago, but Cho had sort of pushed the thought off. Yes, perhaps she quite liked being around Lalo and always looked forward to seeing him...but she'd only just lost her best friend and the love of her life, Cedric, three years previously. She'd never even been able to tell any of her American friends about Cedric or what had happened to him. Not only that, but even if Cho and Lalo *did* want to get together, they were still from two very different worlds. If Cho dated him, she would have to do it while keeping the secret of her magical heritage from him – she'd only be able to tell him about her past and abilities at all if they at some point had a magical child together, an idea Cho found so ridiculously cruel that it made her feel nauseous. To have to lie so thoroughly to someone you claimed to love...Cho didn't think she could in good conscience do such a thing.

At that moment, the people near the front of the line suddenly began to chatter and fidget: there was movement on the other side of the doors. A minute later, the doors opened, and everyone made a mad rush to swarm inside –

The people outside were so focused on getting in and out of the post office quickly that none of them had any time to realize the danger they'd run into until it was too late.

BAM!

Cho was suddenly thrown backward off her feet in a haze of bricks and dust. Foreign screams filled her ears as she was flung up into the air like a kite being thrown into the wind –

Without skipping a beat, she snatched her wand out of her purse, lashing it at the ground.

“Gravitas Reverti!”

A white rope-like spell flew out of her wand, lashing itself to the street and allowing Cho to pull herself back down to the ground with a light *flump*. Then, ducking several flares of colorful light, she looked around.

All of the Muggles who had been standing beside her in line were floating in mid-air like parade balloons, screaming in terror as they desperately tried to reach the ground. Up a ways Cho saw Lalo rotating sickeningly in mid-air, trying hopelessly to grab onto something as he soared higher.

Her heart panging in fear, Cho whirled around to the source of the rogue spells.

Emerging from the post office were about ten wizards, all dressed in blood red robes and holding their wands aloft as they shot spells in every direction. Each set of robes had a cape and a high neck that covered up each man’s face from the nose down, and each wizard also wore a black pointed hat with a brim that cast dark shadows over their eyes. Two identical symbols were hand-sewn into the front of the wizards’ robes, one on each side of their broad chests, depicting a black spider lashing its legs out against a black circle.

“‘NO TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION!’” one of the younger wizards crowed in obnoxious sarcasm. *“ISN’T THAT THE PHRASE, YOU MAGIC-LESS WRETCHES?!”*

He gave a cold roar of laughter as he waved his wand at Amanda, spinning her around in sickening mid-air pirouettes. Cho’s neighbor was visibly terrified and shaking from head to toe as she struggled to fathom what was happening and how to get away.

“H – HELP!” screamed Amanda.

Cho in an instant barreled forward, lashing her wand at the air aggressively. In a second the young red-robed wizard was blasted off his feet, his wand catapulting out of his grip. The action made the other rival wizards turn around, and Cho immediately had to summon a Shield Charm to block their incoming curses as she hurried forward.

“Hang on, Amanda!” cried Cho.

She ducked several other spells, trying to get closer. Finally she was close enough for her spell to reach.

“*Gravitas Reverti!*”

A strip of white shot forward, wrapping itself around Amanda like the string on the end of a balloon – Cho reached out and grabbed hold of Amanda’s arm, pulling her out of the way as she summoned another Shield around them.

“We need cover, come on!”

Cho pulled Amanda behind a wall even as she kept shooting more spells at the red-dressed wizards.

“Cho – ” Amanda choked, still visibly stunned, “ – w-what – how did – ?”

“No time right now,” Cho said, though she tried to smile reassuringly over her shoulder at her.
“Just stay behind me – ”

“CHO, ON YOUR LEFT!”

Cho whirled around.

A red-robed wizard had appeared out of nowhere and raised his wand, ready to strike, when a shoe flew through the air and collided with the back of his head. The distraction was all Cho needed to

Stun him.

Cho and Amanda looked up, to see Lalo floating overhead. He'd successfully anchored himself to a fire escape ladder with his only foot still wearing a shoe and was trying to reign himself in.

"*Lalo*, thank goodness," breathed Cho.

Even though he looked just as pale and frightened as Amanda, Lalo gave Cho the weakest of smiles.

"I c-could use a hand, Cho, if you've g-got one!" he said, trying to sound as light-hearted as he could.

Cho waved her wand quickly at the air. "*Gravitas Reverti!*"

Lalo descended slowly, returning to the ground with a light *flump*. Although he was still shaking, Lalo put on his bravest face and hopped forward to grab his lost shoe and put it back on.

Meanwhile on the other side of the wall, other wizards had arrived. Unlike the red-robed aggressors, however, they were all dressed in matching, crisply tailored black robes emblazoned with the MACUSA logo.

"Who are they?" asked Lalo, his eyes darting from Cho to the other wizards in confusion.

"They're the good guys," Cho explained quickly.

Lalo and Amanda both opened their mouths as if to question further, but Cho cut them off.

"Not now," she said urgently. "Stay low and out of sight – I've got this –"

"*Cho!*" Lalo cried after her as she barreled back out into the battle.

The Aurors outnumbered the red-dressed wizards within seconds. Seeing that they would likely be caught if they stuck around, the red-dressed wizards began throwing random Muggle bystanders in random directions so that the Aurors would be too distracted in their rescue attempts to halt the group's escape. One man – the blind one with the fluffy dog – had been feeling around on the pavement for something when one of the red-dressed wizards came up behind him and grabbed him off the ground with a blast of magic.

“*REDUCTO!*” cried Cho.

In an instant the red-dressed wizard was catapulted in spirals into a full bike rack, and the blind man landed on the ground. Cho immediately ran over to him, taking his arm to try to help him up.

“Here, I’ve got you...”

The blind man raised his head. Even though his eyes were behind thick black glasses and he clearly couldn't see, he was clearly focusing on her as his lips spread into a wide smile that shone pearly white alongside his coffee-colored skin and coarse black mustache.

“Much obliged, little lady,” he said in a Southern drawl that reminded her of Amanda.

He let go of the little white dog he'd been holding and, to Cho's surprise, it landed on two feet, darting across the pavement to pick up his walking stick off the ground and hand it to the man. As the illusion was stripped off of it, Cho realized the creature wasn't a dog at all – it was really a silvery white ape-like creature with golden eyes.

Cho gawked.

“Wait – *you're* – ?!”

The man smiled more broadly as he unhinged the walking stick, revealing a long gold-painted wand, which he raised in a graceful arc over his head.

“I think this whole thing has gone on long enough,” he said very coolly.

The ape-like creature leapt back onto his shoulder and, without saying a word, the man summoned a large yellowish shield from his wand, one that encapsulated the entire area like a dome. Then he summoned a second white shield – then a green one.

‘Anti-Apparition and Illusionary Shields,’ Cho realized.

Clearly seeing how much danger they were suddenly in, the red-dressed wizards scattered, trying to flee. But the blind wizard seemed unperturbed.

“Now, now, where are y’all off to so quick?” he asked in an almost taunting voice. “Not gonna stay for the after-party?”

The Aurors chased after the red-robed wizards as they tried to dart into alleyways or jump over rooftops. One wizard, a 30-something man with slicked-back black hair and a warm tan, ran right through the chaos and came to a stop beside Cho and the blind man. At first Cho thought he might be an Auror too, but he wasn’t wearing structured black robes like the others – instead he was dressed in a shorter, trenchcoat-like set of gray robes with silky, burgundy-colored sleeves and a high collar over a set of skinny black jeans. Whoever he was, the warmly tanned wizard tossed an unconscious red-robed rioter rather carelessly at the blind man’s feet without looking at him.

“Any injuries, sir?” asked the younger wizard offhandedly.

“Fortunately, no,” said the blind wizard pleasantly. “Good to see you, Tokala.”

The wizard called Tokala raised his eyebrows dully. “That will never *not* be a weird greeting, coming from you.”

Several blasts rang out down the street, no doubt from the Aurors trying to take the red-dressed wizards into custody.

“Duty calls,” Tokala said dryly. “Excuse me.”

“Try to find out all of their identities,” said the blind wizard solemnly.

Tokala gave a small, cocky smirk. “*Try*. As if.”

His small, cold black eyes flickered briefly over Cho before, in an instant, he’d thrust himself off the ground with a blast of magic, hoisting himself onto the closest rooftop so he could give chase alongside the Aurors. As Tokala darted off, several much more harried-looking witches and wizards dressed in large-shouldered three-piece suits dashed to the blind wizard’s side.

“Mr. Fitzgerald, sir!”

“Mr. Vice President, are you all right!?”

Cho gave a start. ‘*Vice President?!*’

She whirled on the blind wizard, who smiled pleasantly as he faced his aids.

“Everyone, calm down – I’m fine,” the man called Fitzgerald said calmly, as he slid his wand back into his walking stick and closed it. “Has Aaron been alerted?”

“Yes, sir – agents intercepted him on his way to his Wizard Dueling conference and escorted him to Safe Haven 16.”

“The Obliviators have been notified?”

“They arrived with us, sir, and they’ll start work immediately.”

“And the press?”

“Held by Hit Wizards until the combatants are safely detained and the Major Investigation Department has finalized their report.”

“Good.”

Fitzgerald tilted his head to the left of his staffers, almost in Cho's direction but without actually turning to face her.

"Are you injured at all, my dear?" he asked her kindly.

"No," Cho said very quickly. Her eyes darted between the man and his staffers uncertainly. The female staffer at the front of the group looked her over beadily, her wrinkles contorting slightly as her eyes narrowed.

"Wand permit, please," she said curtly.

Glancing down at her purse quickly, Cho hesitantly took out the card she was forced to carry alongside her wand and handed it to the woman.

"Cho Chang, Department of Magical Games and Sports, eight months," the staffer recited as she read over the card. "Age eighteen, recently emigrated from the United Kingdom."

Her blue eyes flashed suspiciously at Cho. Fitzgerald, however, beamed.

"So capable in magical combat at eighteen?" he said, smiling just to the left of Cho. "That is impressive."

"Thank you," Cho said reluctantly.

Her eyes darted over her shoulder at the alley she'd left Lalo and Amanda in. If the Obliviators were there, then they'd no doubt be trying to erase what had happened from everyone's minds. She wasn't sure how much her friends could hear of what was going on, but she didn't want a crowd of wizards descending on them out of nowhere – that would no doubt scare them to death. Knowing Lalo, he'd probably try to protect Amanda from them – he might even get hurt trying –

"Who were those men?" Cho decided to ask instead, indicating the red-robed wizard at Fitzgerald's feet.

Fitzgerald's expression became much more solemn, but before he could open his mouth to explain,

his female staffer cut him off.

“Just some loonies, obviously.”

Cho frowned deeply. “They said something about taxation – were they lashing out at Muggles just because we pay taxes to their government?”

“They were clearly off their rocker,” snapped the staffer. “At any rate, it’s certainly nothing a witch who works with *Games and Sports* needs to speculate about – ”

“Paula,” Fitzgerald interrupted her soothingly.

His face still noticeably serious, he turned back to Cho.

“...We don’t really know who those men are or what their goal was yet...but I promise, the matter will be investigated. What must be done now is removing all trace of what’s happened from No-Maj view. Was anyone else with you?”

Cho felt like she’d been seized around the throat.

“No.”

The word came out of her before she could stop herself. It rattled around in her ears painfully, and she prayed that the fear she felt hadn’t filtered through to her face.

“...But...I have friends I’m supposed to be meeting in Chinatown,” she choked out as she struggled to steady her heart rate. “No-Maj friends.”

Cho shot another furtive look at the alley behind her. Fitzgerald’s staffers exchanged sardonic looks.

“Then we won’t keep you,” said Fitzgerald with a small smile. “Thank you for your help, Miss Chang.”

He stroked the silvery ape-like pet on his shoulder. The creature blinked, its golden eyes flashing a light blue that made Cho flinch back in surprise. She inclined her head respectfully to the Vice President, putting forward her best smile, and then dashed off in the direction of Chinatown.

She hoped beyond hope that Lalo and Amanda had overheard her and gotten the hint to meet her...

Once Cho had left and the Obliviators had completed their work, a freckled staffer shorter than the others approached Fitzgerald, telling him he had a report to relay from the Head of the Magical Investigation Department. Fitzgerald excused the rest of his staff, following the freckled man to a black limousine that was waiting a few blocks away. The man opened the door for Fitzgerald before climbing in beside him. Once the door was closed, the staffer waved his quartz-handled cherry wand at the front seat, and the car with the dark-tinted windows began to drive down the road by itself.

“What have you found out, then, Tokala?” asked Fitzgerald.

In an instant, the freckled staffer’s pale complexion and light hair melted away as he transformed into the young, warmly tanned wizard from before.

“They were members of yet another newly formed ‘*magical pride*’ group called the Web of Mages,” Tokala said coolly. “Most unemployed or underemployed, some with criminal histories, but all male, Pureblood, and dissatisfied. This group in particular recruited most of its members from recently graduated Ilvermorny alumni.”

Fitzgerald shook his head in disappointment. “To hear my old alma mater played host to ideas like that...”

Tokala raised his eyebrows dully.

“I know,” he said, his voice coolly deadpan, “a Northeastern private school founded by Europeans, promoting elitism and privilege?”

In a second he’d transformed into a perfect replica of Fitzgerald’s running mate – a tall, elderly man

with a mane of artificially blond hair, a winning smile, and tiny watery green eyes.

“*Perfectly* unthinkable!” he added in a perfect imitation of Aaron Crowe’s thick, pompous voice.

Fitzgerald smiled amusedly. “You are awfully good at that.”

Tokala transformed back into himself smoothly.

“Sir,” he said more seriously, “this is the fifth supposedly ‘*lone wolf*’ hate group my department has dealt with in the last year. I know that the Congress refuses to see a connection, but I am not arrogant enough to follow suit.”

“And neither am I,” said Fitzgerald solemnly. “But Congress doesn’t want to set aside resources to combat the problem at its source, so it, at present, cannot acknowledge the problem even *exists*. Aaron’s coming around slowly, but he’s far more concerned with the British Ministry of Magic deciding not to host the Quidditch World Cup.”

Tokala’s eyes narrowed slightly as he rested a hand on Fitzgerald’s upper arm.

“Sir, I believe that issue might be related to our current problem. It’s clear the British Ministry wants to keep the world at bay because it has something to hide, and all of the reports I’ve gathered – ”

“ – Have correlations with your investigation? I wondered about that.”

Fitzgerald’s silvery white pet curled up on the seat beside him, its eyes once again flashing blue. It gave a little chirp and pushed down on the button lowering the tinted window to their right, opening it in time for a magical paper airplane to fly through it and land in Fitzgerald’s lap.

“Thank you, Cassandra,” Fitzgerald said, stroking the top of his pet’s head affectionately.

He opened the letter and the thick, pompous voice of Aaron Crowe erupted out of it.

“Travis? *Travis*, old boy, are you *all right*? Bless me, when I *heard* what happened, I nearly had a *heart* attack! Magical *Dueling* Conference is rescheduled to 6, following a *press* conference regarding the attack on the *downtown* post office...will definitely want *you* in attendance, to reassure the *reporters*...! Write back with *the projected* time of your *arrival*! Signed, Aaron *Crowe*, President of the *Magical* Congress of the United States.”

Once the letter had finished reading itself, it shredded itself into pieces, which Cassandra stuffed into her mouth and chewed on absently.

“It seems I’ll have to get right back to my office,” said Fitzgerald lightly. “But before you drop me off, Tokala, I’d like to give you a name of someone you should talk to.”

“No-Maj or Mage?” asked Tokala.

“She’s a witch,” said Fitzgerald. “Cho Chang of the Department of Magical Games and Sports, previously from the United Kingdom.”

Tokala raised his eyebrows, seeming interested for the first time.

“Do you mean that girl who protected you when you were stupidly feeling around on the ground for your wand rather than just letting Cassandra pick it up?”

“Cassandra shouldn’t do *all* the hard work,” said Fitzgerald with a wry smile. “And besides...she showed me a vision of someone coming to help me.”

Tokala’s cold black eyes narrowed slightly. “...So you let her.”

Fitzgerald smiled broadly, and his face gained a charming warmth that made him look years younger.

“What can I say? I love finding other people who want to actively fight evil, rather than just passively standing back. That’s why I was so happy you climbed the ladder so quickly, so I could appoint you Head of Major Investigations.”

Tokala smirked slightly as the car came to a stop.

“Sometimes I forget how alike we truly are, sir,” he said dryly. “A couple of shady dudes with delusions of grandeur.”

Fitzgerald chuckled as he climbed out of the limousine.

“I’d prefer the term ‘*idealists*,’ my friend,” he said, as Cassandra bounded up onto his shoulder. “Two among many, ready to step up to the plate.”

With a white smile, he closed the door, leaving Tokala alone in the car. A moment later, the limousine drove off again, turning around and heading in the direction from whence it came.

Chapter End Notes

After reading all of the notes J.K. has made about the American Wizarding World and both juxtaposing it with American history and my own experiences as an American, I have come to the logical conclusion that Ilvermorny must only be one American wizarding school of many -- it and the Salem Witches' Institute (mentioned in GoF) are just the two best known abroad. Tokala in particular, being half-Cherokee, was taught at home by his father and the magical members of his family, as per Cherokee wizarding custom.

Cho Shares Her Secrets

Cho's heart was racing as she paced back and forth under the red archway marking the entrance of Chinatown, hugging her bright blue coat tightly around herself.

She had lied to the MACUSA. *She had lied to the Vice President's face*, violated the Statute of Secrecy – endangered both her and her parents' jobs and place in the country –

Cho knew she hadn't wanted to tell them about Lalo and Amanda. She knew she hadn't wanted to watch them get their minds wiped. She knew that she loathed the thought of having to lie to her friends all over again...yet what she'd done...she knew it was foolish. Muggles were not allowed to know about the Wizarding World. It was one of the most central tenants of magical society, one instilled to protect witches and wizards from persecution. But Cho also recalled what her father and his Guilder friends used to say about the rigid social divide causing more tension than it healed, and couldn't help but agree. A system where she had to lie to the people she cared about couldn't be moral, could it? But still, to break the law so thoroughly, when she and her family had had to flee to the United States to escape the Death Eaters...

Could she just adjust Lalo and Amanda's memories herself, once they met up? The thought made Cho nauseous. *Surely* she wouldn't need to do that – surely they'd understand –

“Cho!”

Cho whirled around. Running up to her, their faces both very white and terrified, were Lalo and Amanda. Lalo came to a shaky stop a foot away from Cho, panting as his eyes darted over her face. Amanda lagged behind him, her pale face tinged with green.

Cho's lips spread into a weak smile and she made a movement as if to throw her arms around them, but both Lalo and Amanda inched back.

“Cho,” Lalo said very quietly, “I think we need to talk.”

Cho couldn't quite fight back the hurt in her expression as her eyes drifted from Lalo to Amanda. Her neighbor had her eyes averted and her hands were trembling at her sides.

Cho swallowed, giving a weak nod.

“...Yes. Yes...of course.”

The three walked together down Mott Street, turning off toward the oldest restaurant in Chinatown: an old favorite with a muted red-and-pink-striped awning called the Nom Wah Tea Parlor. They selected a red booth in the far corner of the crowded establishment – after her experience with the D.A., Cho had learned the importance of hiding in plain sight, rather than sticking out by meeting in quieter, remoter places.

Once they were seated and had ordered their food, Cho cautiously slipped her wand out under the table, pointing it toward the sides of the booth.

“*Muffliato*,” she whispered.

A faint flash of light bounded off the faux leather cushions, but it was so fast it could easily have been mistaken for sunlight. Amanda and Lalo, however, who had reason to suspect magic, stiffened sharply.

“What’d you do?” Amanda asked at once.

“I cast a spell that’ll make it harder for us to be overheard,” said Cho.

She glanced between them again, trying to steady her heart rate.

“I’m sure you...have a lot of questions.”

“Just a few,” said Lalo. His tone should have been light, but his voice and eyes were very solemn. “What *are* you exactly, Cho? Who were those men who attacked us, and who were those ‘*good guys*’ that you for some reason still had to lie to? Why was that man called the Vice President – he didn’t look like Al Gore to me – and what are Muggles and No-Majs?”

“And,” said Amanda sharply, “why did you keep all this from us? How long has this been going on?”

Staring down her friends and being the subject of their critical gazes was enough to make Cho feel like some pathetic flobberworm curled up on the back of her seat. She took a moment to gather her thoughts and then took a deep breath.

“...I’m a witch – not a bad witch, though, I’m a good witch. Most witches are good witches, really,” she mumbled, biting her lip uncomfortably. “...Witches and wizards...well, we basically hide in plain sight. We live our day-to-day lives in secret...separately from Muggles, or people without magic. American wizards call them – you – No-Majs. Witches and wizards have their own governments outside of the Muggle ones that deal with magical affairs – that man you saw was the Vice President of the MACUSA, or Magical Congress of the United States of America. He’s the equivalent of your Vice President, except he’s a wizard. The United Kingdom and some other countries have Ministries of Magic.”

Lalo frowned in thought. “And no one knows about you?”

“Most don’t. We’re not allowed to tell any Muggles of our existence unless they’re a close family member, like in the cases of a witch having a child with a Muggle or a magical child being born into a Muggle family. In America, intercultural marriages were only just made legal thirty years ago.”

“So you’re basically taught to lie about what you are,” said Lalo grimly.

Cho bowed her head. “...I suppose so.”

She glanced at Amanda, but her blond neighbor avoided her gaze. Lalo glanced between the two women, reaching across the table to transfer two servings of chicken and noodles onto his plate. He then did the same for Cho and Amanda’s plates.

Slightly comforted by Lalo’s gesture, Cho picked up her chopsticks and began to eat.

“...My parents and I emigrated here from the U.K. for our safety. Dad had been getting a lot of scrutiny from the Ministry of Magic in Britain because he believed wizards and Muggles should live side-by-side, rather than apart.”

“Why is that a problem?” asked Lalo, his eyes narrowing.

“The Wizarding World separated itself from the Muggle World centuries ago, in response to all of the witch trials and the persecution witches and wizards used to face. Even now that things are different, there are a lot of witches and wizards who are stuck in the old ways...and a lot of our laws, like the Statute of Secrecy, force us to hide our magic so as not to scare the Muggles.”

“Those guys in red sure didn’t seem to care about that,” Amanda pointed out, her tone unusually sharp.

Cho’s gaze fell down to her plate.

“...No, they didn’t,” she said very quietly. “But most witches and wizards aren’t like them. I don’t know much about those wizards, but I know what they’re like – we have a group like them back in Britain called the Death Eaters. They’re terrible, evil people who believe that they’re somehow superior to Muggles as well as Muggle-born witches and wizards. I bet those wizards in red were inspired by them to act out and attack Muggles.”

“And the...MACUSA...was there to stop them,” presumed Lalo, and Cho nodded.

“And hide what had happened from everybody,” said Amanda grimly, her eyes critical upon Cho’s face. “How exactly were they plannin’ to do *that*, Cho?”

Cho suddenly was having a lot of trouble looking Amanda in the face.

“...They have people called Obliviators,” she murmured. “Their job is to fix any damage made by magic and to alter the memories of any Muggle witnesses – ”

Amanda’s blue eyes widened in anger. “Y’all can *rewrite people’s memories*?”

“Y-yes, but...usually only *certified* wizards do it – Memory Charms are really delicate things – ”

“Could really mess up someone’s mind, could it?” snapped Amanda.

Cho and Lalo both looked at her in surprise.

“Amanda,” said Lalo in concern, “are you all right?”

“*All right?*” Amanda laughed coldly. “Aw yeah, o’ *course* I’m all right – why wouldn’t I be all right, knowin’ that my friend could’ve been playin’ *hacky-sack* with my brain and I would never even know it?”

Cho’s eyes widened in horror. “Amanda, I would never – ”

“*Really?*” Amanda shot back harshly. “*Never?* Not when us knowin’ what you are is against the *law* in your backwards world?”

Once again her decision to lie to the MACUSA seemed very foolish to Cho. She tried very hard not to show the guilt on her face.

“I – I hoped that you would keep my secret,” she said meekly, “once I explained...”

Amanda’s eyes flared. “Tell the truth, Cho – if you hadn’t been forced to, would you *ever* have told me? Would you have ever told Lalo?”

Cho was left speechless. The lack of an answer seemed to be the straw that broke Amanda’s back, and she forcefully got up and stormed out of the restaurant.

“Amanda!” cried Cho, hurrying to get up herself. “Amanda, come back!”

But she didn’t. Cho lowered herself back down onto her seat, and she buried her face in her hands to hide her tears.

Lalo looked from the doorway Amanda had left through to back at Cho. Then he leaned across the table to take hold of Cho’s arm.

“Cho...”

Cho sniffled.

“Do you think I’m a terrible person too, Lalo?” she mumbled. “Because I lied to you?”

“You didn’t lie to me,” said Lalo sympathetically. “Well, okay, yeah, maybe you did a little, but... well, sometimes you have to do things you’re not proud of, to get by. I’ve known plenty of people who had to run on the bad side of the tracks, to try to make it to the mainland – *mierda*, even just to make it here in New York City!”

He squeezed Cho’s arm reassuringly.

“Amanda’s probably never had to lie like we have, Cho,” he said softly. “I bet she grew up in a world where honesty will out – where lying is always a sin, regardless of the reason. And I understand why you probably feel bad about having had to lie...but I think if Amanda or I had been in your shoes, we would’ve probably made the same decision. I don’t know if *I* could’ve easily made the choice between protecting my job and my family and telling my friends about who I really am.”

He smiled weakly when she looked up at him.

“...I have to admit, though,” he said sheepishly, “it’s kind of weird, after all this time, finding out that this girl you know could secretly kick your ass if she wanted to.”

Cho couldn’t completely bite back a laugh. Lalo’s smile widened.

“I’m sure Amanda will come around,” he said gently. “Just give her time.”

Lalo walked Cho all the way back to the post office and then home to her apartment complex. Cho was glad for the company; even though Lalo had taken it so much better than she expected,

Amanda's reaction had really shaken her. She didn't really blame Amanda for being upset, but she also had no idea how she was *ever* going to patch things up with her.

After Cho said goodbye to Lalo, she immediately went to go knock on Amanda's door. To her surprise, a moment later, a voice called,

"Come in."

She opened the unlocked door and walked inside.

Amanda was sitting on the couch, her feet draped over the arm as she rifled through a copy of GQ magazine. When she saw Cho, she smiled slightly.

"Hi, hon," she greeted.

Cho was taken aback by her reaction.

"...Hi," she replied hesitantly.

Amanda seemed to notice her hesitance. Her smile slid off her face and she put on a more serious expression as she slid off the couch and bustled toward the kitchen, which was only eight feet away in such a tiny apartment.

"I'm afraid I don't got much time tonight," she said dryly, "Rochester decided that he *does*, in fact, want to run through Act One's choreography again – I expect he'll be pagin' Lalo and Paul any time now..."

Cho's eyes narrowed in confusion as she followed Amanda.

"...Is that so?"

Amanda looked up at Cho, her expression almost curious.

“Somethin’ wrong, honey?”

“No,” said Cho quickly.

She tried to obscure the hesitance from her face as she sat down at the kitchen table, sliding her hands into her coat pockets.

“I finally got my taxes submitted today,” she said casually. “Lalo went with me to the post office.”

Amanda laughed. “About time – bringin’ it right down to the wire, weren’t you?”

Cho’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, we did.”

In a second, she whipped out her wand.

“Locomotor Mortis!”

Before her spell could land, however, Amanda whipped out her own wand and blocked it with a wordless Shield Charm.

Cho shot to her feet, slashing at the air with other spells.

“Stupefy! Reducto! Tollere Vinculum!”

The person who resembled Amanda leapt across the room with great speed, dodging each spell as it collided with the wall and fridge, leaving singe marks. At last Cho managed to snatch hold of the stranger’s ankle with a flare of rope-like yellow magic, yanking them up off their feet and tossing them toward the ceiling. In a second, though, they’d done a back flip in mid-air and landed back on the ground.

“Not bad!” said the person resembling Amanda with a smirk.

Cho was not amused, though. Her eyes flaring with anger, she lashed her arm out aggressively.

“Expelliarmus!”

The spell hit its target, making her opponent’s wand fly out of their hand. Cho moved forward sharply with her wand pointed right between the person’s eyes.

“Who are you and what have you done with Amanda?” she demanded.

Amazingly the person wearing Amanda’s face looked remarkably composed. In a flash they’d reached into their pocket and whipped out a second wand.

“Expelliarmus.”

Cho’s wand went flying out of her hand. She whirled on her opponent in shock, but they merely smiled at her.

“Calm down, Miss Chang,” the person resembling Amanda said in a much more level, monotone male voice. “Your friend is fine – the message Rochester left simply asked for her to get there right away, rather than in a while. I thought I’d just take the opportunity to meet you here, so that we’d be away from prying eyes and ears.”

Amanda’s façade melted away, revealing a 30-something man with a warm tan, slicked-back black hair, and endless black eyes.

Cho gave a start. “You – you were at the post office this morning!”

“Indeed I was,” said the man dryly. “Tokala Kyon Mulligan, Head of Major Investigations, at your service.”

He took out a gray handkerchief from his pocket, shaking it twice. In a flash the handkerchief had grown and transformed into a set of trenchcoat-like gray robes with silky burgundy sleeves, which

he put on over the skinny jeans and camisole he'd been wearing while disguised as Amanda.

"I swear, women's fashion has become more and more uncomfortable every year," Tokala said dully, flicking his wand at his jeans and camisole to adjust their fit.

Still keeping her eyes firmly on Tokala, Cho darted across the room to pick up her wand.

"Why did you disguise yourself as Amanda?" she asked suspiciously. "How did you know all of that stuff about her – about Lalo and Paul and her play?"

"I do extensive research on the people I talk to beforehand," answered Tokala with a shrug, as he strolled across the room to pick up his spare wand and slip it back in his pocket. "Amanda Marion is widely considered to be your best friend here in New York, so I figured that one, you would visit her, and two, I'd have to know her well if I had any hope of getting you comfortable enough to come inside. I must say, you know how to pick your friends, Miss Chang – the grandchild of a known Scourer..."

"A what?" said Cho, taken aback.

"A No-Maj who preaches the existence of magic and the extermination of all witches and wizards," said Tokala. He waved his wand at the walls and fridge to repair the damage. "Most are simply considered crazy and ignored, as is the case with Modesty Marion – it seems that after a few run-ins with MACUSA officials, she's gone a touch senile and her family keeps her cloistered away from polite society. Still, the MACUSA likes to keep an eye on people like her, for obvious reasons."

Cho felt like her blood had run cold. Suddenly Amanda's horror and anger about her magical heritage made sense.

"Regardless," said Tokala, "I decided to meet you here because you and your parents live together in your apartment...and to be frank, I'd like to keep this private."

He strolled back over to the couch, crossing one leg idly over the other and resting his arms on top of his crossed leg.

"Miss Chang, would you tell me why you and your parents left the United Kingdom?"

Cho didn't sit down.

"...Why do you ask?" she asked after a moment.

Tokala smiled wryly. "May I take that as a '*no*'?"

"No," said Cho uncomfortably. "I just want to know why."

Tokala's face grew a little more severe. "I want to know why because I'm the Head of Major Investigations. Now will you tell me or not?"

Despite her reluctance and lingering suspicion, Cho forced herself to keep her composure.

"...We left because of the War," she answered, choosing her words carefully. "You know about the War, of course."

"About Voldemort? Naturally," said Tokala.

His use of the name made Cho flinch. Tokala inclined his head to her.

"Forgive me – I forget how sensitive people are to that name. In America it's so easy for all of us to sort of see the whole thing as a European problem – not something we have to worry about, from the other side of the world."

His voice gained a strange, icy quality as he added the last part, but the iciness immediately left his voice as he continued.

"...You left because of the War...yet your family has no recent No-Maj lineage...and from what little notes I've been able to scrounge up, I see no evidence the Death Eaters targeted you or your family. What I *have* found, however, is Ministry surveillance."

“The Ministry was looking at everyone,” Cho said very quickly, her heart pounding hard in her chest. “They were afraid of the Death Eaters, so they went overboard in trying to protect us – ”

“Including targeting political dissidents,” said Tokala smoothly. “Much like they are now, I daresay.”

Cho faltered, taken aback. Tokala’s lips curled up in a slight, cool smile.

“Miss Chang, the British Ministry is not as clever as it thinks it is. Even a *blind man* could tell they have something to hide, considering how much they’ve been keeping the world at arm’s length. And from the intelligence I’ve been able to acquire from the Bulgarian and French Ministries, Pius Thicknesse has clearly gotten swept up in the ideas of ‘*magical pride*,’ likely in reaction to his predecessor’s assassination. He’s hired people once suspected of working with Voldemort – ” Cho flinched again, “ – excuse me – and dredged up old protocols for European-style arranged marriages. And as I’m sure you’ve noticed, the British Ministry embracing such policies has made them seem more acceptable to the world at large – meaning that other blood supremacists suddenly feel emboldened enough to come out of the woodwork and cause mayhem elsewhere...”

Cho’s eyes widened. “Like at the post office?”

“Exactly.”

Cho bit her lip. Tokala considered her carefully.

“The reason I wanted to speak with you is because I think you might have first-hand knowledge of what happened and is happening now in Britain,” he said solemnly. “Vice President Fitzgerald and I will never be able to convince President Crowe and the Magical Congress to intervene unless we have evidence that what’s happening in Britain is a threat to our national security.”

Cho’s eyes narrowed in revulsion. “You mean the MACUSA won’t care unless *they’re* in danger? No matter how many people get hurt, no matter how many die?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Tokala said coldly.

Cho’s hands clutched at the sides of her coat. Tokala’s endless black eyes bore into her, rippling with the faintest hint of righteous anger.

“Crowe and the people in his corner are too determined to act like Britain’s just going through some weird *phase*. As long as they’re allowed to believe that, we’ll be forced to just stand on the sidelines and watch, even as the world falls apart.”

Cho looked up, her eyes narrowing upon his face critically. “And what would you want to do instead? If you didn’t have to stand back and watch?”

“Stop them,” Tokala said at once. “Save whomever we could.”

Seeing Cho’s hesitance, he pressed on solemnly.

“Miss Chang...my family knows what happens when wizards turn a blind eye to the suffering of No-Majs, let alone their own kind. More people have died at the hands of neglect and ignorance than open hostility. When I joined the MACUSA, I made a vow to myself and to my family that I would never sit back and let anyone terrorize others - that I would do anything and everything to act, rather than simply react. Now that Pureblood supremacists have come out in full again, I aim to confront them at every front...and I suspect that Britain’s War may not be as unrelated to our problems as the MACUSA thinks. That’s why I need whatever intelligence you can give me – *anything* about the state of affairs abroad.”

Cho’s gaze drifted to the wall absently. She remembered everything she’d read in her scrapbook over the last year – all of the awful things her friends had gone through and learned about. She’d kept all of it to herself for so long, and the idea of sharing everything intimidated her. But right now, that information might really have a purpose – it might be enough to persuade the MACUSA to help the British Wizarding World fight back against the Death Eaters. And despite his shadiness at the start, judging by the glint of passionate conviction in his eyes despite his cool, level voice, Cho had a feeling that this Mulligan guy might have enough honor that he could be trusted, after all.

“The Ministry wasn’t just persuaded to use certain policies,” Cho said at last. “The Death Eaters took it over.”

Tokala stiffened, his eyebrows furrowing, but he didn’t speak. His gaze told Cho to go on.

“I’ve been staying in touch with my friends abroad in secret. I haven’t shared my letters because I didn’t want them confiscated and it’s the only way I can get news from back home...but I know the Ministry is not in control of itself anymore. The day Scrimgeour was assassinated, one of my

friends from school, Owen Cauldwell, went to the Ministry after receiving a troubling note from his mother, and a team of Aurors murdered both of them when they tried to burn the contents of the MASTIF archives. It's thought they were trying to protect the owners of those files, as the archive had the addresses and personal information of every witch and wizard in Britain. That same day the Aurors tried to capture two of my other friends who are Muggle-born, supposedly for '*stealing magic*.' One of those same friends is now trapped in a place called the Saeva Ward, where the Unspeakables are now subjecting them to horrible experiments in an attempt to '*take their magic back!*' All of the Muggle-borns, Squibs, Guilders, and Muggle sympathizers are underground now. It's not safe for them out in the open anymore, since the Ministry's chasing them now too instead of protecting them. Xenophilius Lovegood's daughter was kidnapped and held prisoner because his paper had spoken unfavorably of the Death Eaters. And at Hogwarts, the Pureblood students who've stayed are being taught that the Death Eaters killing Muggles is *justice* after how long wizards and witches have been underground, and the seventh year students have been taught how to use the *Cruciatius Curse* on the underclassmen! There's also this radio station I've been tuning into, called Potterwatch – a old classmate of mine named Lee Jordan is in charge of it, and he's included news about the Ministry and its operations, since the *Daily Prophet* has been taken over too. It's clear to just about *everyone* by now that Thicknesse is under the Imperius Curse, and that Antonin Dolohov and Etienne Montmercy are the ones *really* in charge. Montmercy is an absolute *monster* – he killed my friend Arjuna and her partners, all because they were writing pamphlets opposing the Death Eaters, and imprisoned his own son in the Saeva Ward too..."

Everything came spilling out once Cho started. By the end she'd started to cry, but she refused to hide her face: instead she gritted her teeth and clenched her fists, her eyes blazing through her tears.

Tokala did not speak again for a long moment after Cho had finished. His endless black eyes drifted up to the wall just past Cho's shoulder, lingering there. Then, his jaw clenching, he got to his feet.

"Unbelievable."

He strode across the room, heel-face-turning at the wall and coming back around in a wide kind of pacing.

"*Unbelievable*," he murmured again.

Although he was stunned, his expression appeared very stony and his jaw was clenched with muted anger. When he turned back to Cho, his black eyes were flaring with a fury that didn't fully touch his stony face.

"I understand your reluctance to share your letters," he said urgently, "but would you allow me to copy them?"

Cho nodded.

“Good – if you hadn’t, I might have had to insist.”

Tokala brought a hand through his hair, his black eyes boring into the wall. He was clearly thinking hard.

“If your letters confirm all of this, then it would mean that the British Ministry of Magic has been taken over by an outside force. In other words, we have a hostage situation, on a national scale – one that could theoretically happen to *any* country, if the Death Eaters’ influence were to spread. That just might be enough cause for us to send agents to Britain, to contain and provide aid...”

Cho’s heart leapt. “You think the Congress will agree to send help?”

“I’m no optimist,” said Tokala, “but I believe the Vice President should be able to wrangle some agreement with this kind of testimony backing him up. I’d say we have a reason to be hopeful.”

His lips spread into a small smirk as he faced Cho again. “Thank you, Miss Chang. Your cooperation is appreciated.”

Cho smiled back. “If it’ll help my friends, then it’s my pleasure.”

“It very well may.”

Tokala considered Cho for a moment, his eyes boring into her once again.

“Vice President Fitzgerald was impressed by your talent at wizard dueling,” he changed the subject so smoothly it barely impacted the cadence of his voice. “May I ask who trained you?”

“Harry Potter,” Cho answered. Images of being back at the D.A. flickered through her mind and she couldn’t completely fight back a smile.

Tokala blinked, but otherwise showed no visible surprise on his face.

“The Boy Who Lived – that would explain a lot. Yet you also seem experienced with battle itself. Did you have ties to the Order of the Phoenix?”

“No,” said Cho. “Harry formed an organization called Dumbledore’s Army three years ago, when Dolores Umbridge was our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

“The Head of the Magical Agents for Securing Threats and Investigating Felonies?”

“Yes. She refused to teach us how to defend ourselves with magic, as the Ministry still refused to believe You-Know-Who was back, so Harry taught us instead, in secret. When the Death Eaters attacked Hogwarts last year, we all met up again and helped fight them.”

“Interesting.”

Tokala’s smirk widened as he shrugged off his robes once again, tapping them with his wand to shrink them back into a handkerchief.

“Well, Miss Chang, as much as I’d love to stay and chat,” he said idly as he slid the handkerchief back into his jean pocket, “I really need to bring those documents to the MACUSA at once.”

In seconds he’d transformed again into Amanda, and he tossed her blond hair over his shoulder offhandedly.

“After you,” he said in a perfect imitation of Amanda’s Southern drawl.

May 1st

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 15, 1998

Dear Cho,

I'm so glad that you were able to find a friend at the MACUSA that could help! From what you've said, it sounds like Mr. Mulligan sincerely wants to help, even if the MACUSA is reluctant to do so. I hope that he and the Vice President are able to convince the rest of the Magical Congress to take action!

Keep in touch!

Love,

Hannah

Cho,

It was very risky of you to share everything like that. You don't know Mr. Mulligan that well and, given that he has such a high position in the MACUSA, he might be more focused on American interests than anything else. Still I would like to trust your judgment – after all, just because he uses deceptive methods doesn't necessarily mean he doesn't have a moral compass. If nothing else, he never forced you to reveal anything, and he did give a full explanation about what his intentions were. I pray that everything turns out well. Please stay safe.

In other news, Blaise has not returned to school. There are rumors circulating that he and his mother fled the country, as neither of them have been seen or heard from in weeks. The last time I saw him, Blaise seemed to have realized how little Purebloods have won under the Death Eaters' rule...I suppose his mother must have had similar feelings and the two thought it safer to cut their losses and run rather than stay.

Love from

Daphne

Don't worry, Daphne, I'm sure it'll be fine. From the sound of things, Mulligan's really interested in protecting the States, and You-Know-Who isn't just a threat to us here in Britain, you know.

Keeping my fingers crossed, Cho – send more news when you can!

Cheers!

Colin

April 20, 1998

An update from Tokala –

Vice President Fitzgerald called a meeting with President Crowe and his Cabinet to discuss the contents of our letters. Crowe's staff is troubled by a lot of it, but it seems they're still reluctant to directly confront the Ministry of Magic and want more proof to verify our "accusations." I don't really understand how first-hand accounts could be reduced down to being simple "accusations," but Tokala said it was likely that they wouldn't want to call Pius Thicknesse a liar, as no doubt he would deny everything. Fitzgerald, however, called their bluff and said that if they want proof, then Crowe will simply have to give the Major Investigations Department the authority to retrieve it... and Crowe gave in! With presidential permission, Tokala has formed a new branch of the MID called the UMA, or Undercover Magical Agents, who will be in charge of investigating magical extremist activity abroad! If all goes well, those Agents will be able to officially investigate the Death Eaters' activities and even provide aid to their victims! Things are finally turning around!!

In other news, I've been promoted! (Sort of.) The Department of Magical Games and Sports has decided to send a few of its members to meet with the British department about reinstating the Quidditch World Cup, and they chose me as one of their representatives (likely because my parents once worked for the British Ministry). I've told Lalo that I'm leaving at the end of the month, but when I visited Amanda's apartment to try to tell her, the superintendent informed me that she'd left. She said she needed to visit her ill grandmother in South Carolina, but didn't say anything about when she was planning on returning. Considering that Lalo and no one else in the cast of The Wizard of Oz knew about her departure either, I can't help but worry. I'm sure she's still mad at me, but I just really hope she's okay...

I love you all – please stay strong!

Love,

Cho

Dear Cho,

I'm sorry about Amanda. It wasn't fair that you two had to separate on such bad terms, given everything that's going on. I understand why you're worried about her, but perhaps for now, the best thing would be just to believe in her. From everything you've said about her, it seems like she's a really good and strong person.

It's so great that Mulligan and the Vice President were able to convince the MACUSA! We've all felt so trapped here at Hogwarts, and I'm sure everyone else in Britain has too, but it's so encouraging to know that there are people outside You-Know-Who's influence who see what's happening and want to help! I wonder if that's why the Ministry cancelled the Quidditch World Cup in the first place – it might remind everyone that You-Know-Who isn't as powerful as the Death Eaters want us to believe.

Write back soon!

Love from

Astoria

April 23, 1998

Cho –

Congratulations on your promotion. Keep your head down and don't do anything stupid.

MB

April 25, 1998

I finished my April caKe today! It's a winged horse made of treS leches cake with marshmallow frosting and fondant details. I originally had wanted to make it all white like an AbraXan winged horse, but I figured sOme thing colorful would be more cheerful, so I used food coloring to paint its

feathers, tail, and Mane rainbow colors. Might be a bit much, but...well, given how the dark cloUds finally seem to be fading, I figured it was about tiMe for a rainbow!

KeVin

April 30, 1998

Hi, everyone,

I've just boarded the plane to London. The flight will take about seven hours, so we won't be getting in until pretty late tonight. Once we arrive, we'll pretty much have to just check into our hotel and crash, and then tomorrow afternoon we'll head over to the Ministry of Magic for our meeting.

I left Amanda a note under her door explaining where I've gone and why – I only hope she'll read it when she finally comes home...

I have to be honest: I'm kind of scared. I'm with a few other representatives and they'll all nice people, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm going back to a place so dangerous that Mum, Dad, and I ran away from it – a place now controlled by the Death Eaters. It's home, yes, but at the same time, I know it's nothing like "home" anymore. Even though I've missed Britain for such a long time, I suddenly feel homesick for New York, and I've only just left it.

I love you all! Wish me luck!

Love,

Cho

Far away from Hogwarts on the coast of Devon, a young man with a clean-shaven head stood in the mouth of a cave beside the coast. His frame was a silhouette against the starry sky as he stared out, his wand dangling through the long fingers of his dark-skinned hand.

Jacques Jengu, like many of the people who had gone into hiding from the Death Eaters, looked worse for the wear. His jeans and sweater were worn, a rough beard had started prickling at his jaw line, and he was so frail and sickly-looking he resembled a skeleton. Even his sharp-lidded brown eyes had started popping out of their sockets a little, as if his face had shrink-wrapped itself against his skull. It was unsurprising, given how little he'd eaten in the last few months – he'd sacrificed

his own rations to keep the Muggles he and his cohorts had forcibly drafted alive. But he had to do it – if he let them die, he'd be no better than the Death Eaters...

“You – you monster! You think in a million years that I would ever leave my dad in your hands? The hands of a murderer who justifies killing innocent people and ripping families apart with excuses about how well you treat your victims?”

The memory of Kevin Whitby's cries made Jengu's wand hand tremble at his side.

Jengu knew that when all was said and done, Adrian Enrouge, the Guilders, and he were right – the split between the Muggle and Magical Worlds was responsible for the Dark Lord's rise to power, and the only way to save the Wizarding World was to tear down that divide and start over. He believed in that cause wholeheartedly. Why else would he align himself with the Guild of Griffins, try to garner support...follow Enrouge's proposed plan of drafting Muggle soldiers to help fight the Death Eaters? After all, no one *else* was doing it. The Order of the Phoenix had been squashed, and even the Abraxans only publicized the Ministry's activities – they didn't *stop* them. And something had to be done – something had to change –

And so Jengu had rationalized a lot. He'd rationalized recruiting Muggles by force after his cohort Elaine got captured by the Aurors for trying to reveal the existence of magic in a crowded Muggle pub. He'd rationalized using their Muggle recruits to buy goods and gather news after Ramona was recognized at the market by a disguised Ministry employee and got killed when she tried to escape. He'd rationalized that it was best to kill witnesses after Thomas died trying to recruit a family he didn't realize had a child under the Trace. He'd rationalized keeping the recruits under close watch after one tried to escape while they were eating at a diner in London, only to have the Death Eaters catch up with the group within seconds and kill Liza and Arachne.

It had to be done, Jengu had told himself for so long. It had to be done, for the greater good – to save both the Wizarding and Muggle Worlds...

“ – how well you treat your victims – ”

The word “*victims*” rang unpleasantly in Jengu's ear. The Muggles they'd drafted weren't the Guild's *victims* – they were their soldiers. Their men. Their forces. They were only victims of the War that the Death Eaters had started – just as Jengu, the Guilders, and the rest of the Wizarding World was. The Death Eaters had turned all of them into victims – Muggles, Squibs, Guilders... even just people who thought Muggles weren't inferior to wizards. That was why they *had* to be stopped at all costs...

Kevin's fierce refusal to leave his parents had haunted Jengu long after he'd set him free. Jengu was left wondering what sort of familial bond could coax one to abandon all common sense. Even his mother, who hadn't been *unaffectionate* per se, would have taken separation over the certain death of all parties. That was why she had sent Jengu to get his education at Hogwarts, even if it meant he'd had to stay with his ill-tempered grandfather, who resented his daughter for leaving home and having a child out of wedlock while abroad and so treated Jengu like a responsibility rather than a grandson. Jengu tried to imagine refusing to leave his mother's side, even while knowing she would be safe – the fact that he couldn't do it troubled him immensely.

Jengu had been lost in thought until an older man with a beard and soft green eyes came up behind him. The sound of the man's approach made Jengu stiffen. He glanced over his shoulder without turning around, his sharp-lidded eyes glinting in the dark.

"...Trying to disarm me from behind, Mr. Whitby?" he asked in a tranquil, weary voice.

Elijah Whitby's eyebrows rose coolly. "What would be the point? You'd come right after me, and it's not like I can Apparate."

Jengu returned his gaze to the horizon without a word. Elijah came to stand beside him, his gaze locked on the young wizard's face critically.

"I know we're moving tomorrow," Kevin's father said lowly.

Jengu's eyes flickered over the older man's face, but once again he didn't speak.

"You don't have to do it," Elijah told him sharply.

Jengu turned away, his eyes narrowing. "It's the only choice we have."

"Using twelve Muggles to break into Azkaban is the only choice you have?" demanded Elijah, his voice strained with the effort of both containing his anger and trying to show sympathy. "Listen to yourself! You know we can't see the dementors – you won't be able to protect us all from them!"

Jengu whirled on Elijah, his sharp-lidded eyes flaring with pain. "Don't underestimate me. I'm a Healer – no one will die on my watch."

“*No one?* What about the other Guilders?” challenged Elijah. Jengu flinched, but he pressed on. “The people who tried to escape – the families you wouldn’t take – *my wife?*”

His sharp-lidded eyes widening dangerously, Jengu brought his wand hand up violently, right up to Elijah’s face. As soon as he had, however, he seemed to immediately withdraw, his face filling with a bizarre kind of terror. His wide, mad eyes rippled with pain and his hand shook as he slammed it back against his side and turned away, taking several steps into the cave and away from Elijah.

“It wasn’t my fault,” he murmured desperately. “Arachne thought your wife was with the Ministry – that she was going to capture us – she was only trying to protect us when she did it, she didn’t – ”

The last word got lodged badly in his throat, making his voice crack. Suddenly feeling as though he didn’t know what to say anyway, he trailed off, his words fading away to nothing. He felt Elijah’s eyes boring into his back.

“Jacques,” Elijah said lowly, his voice a little more grounded, “I know you want to help. Even when you and your friends did terrible, unforgivable things, I could tell that you at least meant well. You’ve treated every illness and injury, every menstrual cramp and stubbed toe...and you’ve always protected us at the expense of protecting yourself or the Guild. You’ve given us your food rations, and the clothes off your back.”

He rested a hand on Jengu’s shoulder.

“But you need to take a step back and look at yourself. You joined this group to save the Wizarding World – well, the world isn’t just a *place*, young man: it’s its *people*...and how can you save them when the group you’ve aligned yourself with is responsible for making those people suffer?”

Jengu’s jaw clenched as he tried in vain to suppress his tears.

“I can’t just sit back and do nothing while the Death Eaters destroy everything.”

“But you’ll sit back and do nothing when your own side does terrible things?” asked Elijah.

“We’re not like the Death Eaters,” Jengu said coldly.

“Of course not,” said Elijah. “The Death Eaters hunted down the Guilders – the Guilders fought back. The Guilders wanted to gain power legally; the Death Eaters took it by force. The Death Eaters have killed hundreds, maybe *thousands* more than you, and they outnumber you a hundred to one, if we count their giant and beast allies. Your group was formed in the name of peace – theirs aims for war. The Death Eaters want to destroy the world, while you want to save it...and the only reason you all have acted out like you have is because the Death Eaters’ methods have worked, and no one else’s have. You would have to be an *idiot* to say they’re the same.”

Elijah’s grip tightened on Jengu’s shoulder.

“...But does that make what you’re doing now right?”

“It’s for the greater good,” said the Healer, but an oddly numb, fragile echo shadowed his soft voice.

“What place are any of us in to decide who counts as part of the ‘*greater good*?’”

Jengu didn’t reply: he didn’t seem to know how. Elijah’s expression gained a glint of something almost like pity.

“There’s still time, Jacques,” he said softly. “You don’t have to follow Enrouge’s plan, or the Guild’s decisions. There’s no other Guilders left, so it’s all on you. You can make the right choice.”

After a long, agonizing moment, Jengu turned to Elijah. His tears had streaked down his dark face and glinted in the starlight as he considered the older man. Elijah’s green eyes held a bizarre kind of warmth – something like leniency, forgiveness – yet it was also beseeching and almost encouraging. Jengu had never encountered a gaze quite like it before, except perhaps in the eyes of his teachers at Hogwarts. Professor Flitwick’s eyes had been a little like that, when he would teach Charms – it would always make Jengu work ten times harder to complete whatever assignment was in front of him.

Very slowly Jengu’s sharp-lidded eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched solemnly.

“...I’m sorry, Mr. Whitby,” he murmured. “I promise that I’ll make sure no harm comes to you... but Azkaban *must* fall.”

Elijah opened his mouth as if to argue further, but Jengu forced his best attempt at his old charming smile onto his face and stepped out of Elijah’s hold.

“You should get some sleep now,” the young man said gently as he returned to his original spot in the mouth of the cave, facing the night sky instead of Elijah. “It’s late.”

The next morning, the Ministry of Magic was in disarray.

Folded purple memos soared through the air in the hundreds and countless employees were left abandoned in screening lines as the wizards in charge of them were all called away from their posts. Every Hitwizard and Auror, as soon as they arrived, was immediately pulled aside and ordered to fly, Apparate, or Floo to Azkaban.

One Auror in particular – a young Bulgarian man with dark hair and sunken-in eyes that made him resemble a skull – met Antonin Dolohov as he emerged from the gate that led to the Minister’s offices.

“Mr. Dolohov,” the Bulgarian greeted promptly, his voice a subservient-sounding murmur.

Dolohov’s eyes flashed in recognition, but he did not slow his stride: he thoroughly expected his skull-eyed subordinate to follow him, and he did.

“There has been a breach at the walls of Azkaban,” Dolohov told him very quietly and sharply. “Some sort of Muggle Death’s Head Shell...”

The skull-eyed man turned to him, his face stony. “How many suspects?”

“Only one of value,” growled Dolohov, his own long, twisted face contorted with hatred. “A Guilder called Jacques Jengu – he also has some Muggle *baggage* with him.”

Dolohov stopped the skull-eyed man at the end of the hall by the Floo grates, where countless other Aurors and Hit Wizards were disappearing. He clenched the smaller man's shoulder in a firm grip.

"Terminate all of them," the Death Eater said coldly. "Traitors have no need for a trial."

The skull-eyed man nodded curtly, his stony expression never shifting. "Understood."

"*Antonin!*"

Etienne Montmercy's voice at the far end of the hall caught Dolohov's attention.

Dolohov distractedly patted the Bulgarian twice on the shoulder, before hurrying back across the floor to meet his boyish, blond cohort, who looked very pale and concerned.

"What is it?"

"Word's just arrived from Gringotts bank – an intruder came in disguised as Bellatrix –"

Montmercy grabbed Dolohov's arm, yanking him back in the direction of their offices.

The skull-eyed Bulgarian stayed where he was for a few seconds, glancing around at the crowd of Aurors bustling past him. Then, once he was certain no one was paying attention to him, he returned back the way he came, hiding inside a crowd of yellow-dressed Games and Sports employees as they entered the lift.

He stayed in the lift until it reached the bottom floor. The gate of the lift opened, and the man stepped out as the lift's cool female voice stated, "*Department of Mysteries.*"

The Department had many winding, narrow hallways, but the skull-eyed man navigated them with ease until he reached a door locked with seven silver locks. Raising his wand, he wordlessly unlocked each one, and the black zircon door opened for him.

The dark, colorless room that had once held dozens of dementors and countless Muggle-born prisoners convicted of stealing magic was now abandoned. All that was left was the black zircon fireplace set up at the far end, which was still flickering with the remnants of unnatural blue flames.

His sunken-in eyes examining the fireplace carefully, the skull-eyed Auror raised his wand, swirling it in circles in the air. Trails of purple magic fluttered off of it, orbiting around the fireplace. This continued for several long minutes, before finally the grate very slowly started to shrink, tearing itself silently off of the wall in pieces.

The process was sluggish, but after fifteen grueling minutes, the fireplace was so tiny that the man could pick it up and tuck it into the pocket of his robes. Once he had what he came for, he immediately turned on his heel and hurried back upstairs as fast as he could.

If the Aurors were already heading to Azkaban, then he wasn't going to have much time.

At the Montmercy home, Antoinette Montmercy had been fetching her Walking Magnolia from the top of the staircase so she could return it to her indoor greenhouse when a loud *WHOOSH* from the sitting room caught her ear.

Her head darting to the source of the noise, Antoinette quickly conjured a small pen for her Walking Magnolia on the floor rug with her wand, and then dashed over to the fireplace.

Sitting in the flames was the head of a familiar-looking young man with dark hair and sunken-in, skull-like eyes.

“*Gospoja* Montmercy,” he greeted curtly, “it’s time.”

Antoinette’s brown eyes widened. “Time? You mean – ?”

“Yes – our opportunity has come. I could use your assistance, if you would – ”

The skull-eyed man had to immediately yank his head out of the fireplace because not two seconds later, Antoinette had barreled her way through the flames, wand drawn and her eyes flashing.

“Let’s go.”

The skull-eyed man actually smiled a bit despite himself. With a beckoning gesture, he led Antoinette into the next room, where another woman and two men were waiting.

All of them were young with dark hair and swarthy complexions just like the Auror. The woman was broad-shouldered with striking blue eyes; the man leaning against the wall was very tall with protruding lips, while the other sitting in an armchair was bow-legged with a large nose and thick black eyebrows over a pair of hawk-like eyes. Antoinette was startled when she realized she recognized the last of the men.

“You’re Viktor Krum,” she said, “the Bulgarian Seeker.”

Viktor inclined his head respectfully. “Yes. Antoinette Montmercy, I would guess? *Lavrov* has spoken of you.”

The skull-eyed man shot Viktor a dull look. “Please don’t call me that.”

Viktor smiled wryly as his friend turned back to Antoinette.

“This is Iskra Munter and Georgi Poliakoff – of course you already know Viktor. We met at Durmstrang. It took me some time to acquire the visas that would allow them to enter the country without scrutiny...but having a last name that sounds favorable to blood purists, ah...it can very *occasionally* be helpful.”

Antoinette smiled grimly. “I’m well aware.”

The man called “*Lavrov*” strolled across the room past Iskra and Georgi, indicating another fireplace set up at the back of the room. This one was very different than the one Antoinette had just climbed through – it was made of black zircon and the grate was flickering with tiny blue flames. There was also no Floo Powder anywhere on the mantle.

“This fireplace is one of three,” said Lavrov. “It used to live at the Department of Mysteries, but I...*relocated* it. The other two are at Azkaban – which ve would not vant to visit right now – and, most recently, the Saeva Vard. This fireplace is also one of only two vays to enter the Saeva Vard.”

Antoinette’s eyes narrowed upon his face critically. “Then I suppose it must not be linked to the Floo Network.”

“It is not,” assented Lavrov. “This network is not activated vith Floo Powder – instead dementors have been used to pover them. If there is one dementor on each side, holding a hand up against the base, then a link is formed. Of course, because ve would not vant to bring a dementor here, ve’ll have to improvise...”

Iskra held up a skeletal, corpse-like hand that had been wrapped up in a piece of cloth on a side table.

Antoinette grimaced in disgust; Viktor offered her a sympathetic look.

“It’s distasteful, yes,” he said.

Antoinette glanced from Viktor to the hand to up at Lavrov. “...You’re sure it’ll work?”

He nodded. “The network has the signature of the Bathory Curse, a brand of obscure Dark magic. Its effects are triggered by contact vith ‘*lifeless flesh*.’ It vas once used to force any visitor to sacrifice a life before entering...but as you might expect, it didn’t remain popular long, considering it demanded you sacrifice a comrade every time you used it.”

“So because dementors don’t have souls,” said Antoinette, “they’re able to activate the network.”

“Precisely. One benefit to this ‘*Bloo Network*,’ as I’ve called it, is that vhile it is open, it can allow as many people through as one desires. If it veren’t powered by such disgusting magic, it could be considered revolutionary.”

Lavrov crossed the room, fastening a black cloak over his scarlet Auror robes and putting up the hood.

“The only problem,” he said, “is we cannot simply get to the Saeva Vard by opening up our grate. We’ll need to open the other grate as well – the one inside the Vard. Fortunately I know the other way in...and once I’m inside, I can form the connection.”

Viktor handed Lavrov his thick Gregorovitch wand, and the skull-eyed man pocketed it in his robes. The skull-eyed man then shot a small, cool smile over his shoulder at the others.

“Vish me luck.”

And with that, he Disapparated.

In an instant, Lavrov had arrived in a cemetery in the heart of London.

The atmosphere was oddly still, with a serene, almost innocuous air. The inane twittering of passing songbirds bounced off the intricately carved Victorian headstones and mausoleums, which were decked with ivy that fluttered in the passing breeze.

No one would have guessed what such a peaceful setting could hide.

Lavrov glanced around covertly, before striding through the stone angels and markers toward the chapel at the far end.

The door had been left slightly ajar. Once he determined that he was, in fact, alone, the skull-eyed Bulgarian plowed ahead, right up the aisle to the large carved platform at the top of the hall.

This catafalque and the gate it guarded was the Saeva Ward’s biggest secret. Like the gate leading to the Minister’s staff offices at the Ministry of Magic, one could only open it by surrendering their wand, but it also required a password that just about no one knew. The password was so secret, in fact, that before learning it, the person would have to make the Unbreakable Vow to never share it or the Ward’s location with anyone who hadn’t likewise first made a Vow never to share it. Even the Unspeakables who knew the password had had to make that Vow. That was how the Ward had stayed so under wraps all of these months; even if someone wanted to tell anyone of the Ward’s existence, they couldn’t prove it without sentencing themselves to death.

Taking a deep breath, Lavrov approached the catafalque, placing his wand on top. In an instant a slot had opened up in the marble and swallowed his wand, and he murmured the password so softly that even someone standing right next to him probably wouldn't have heard it.

The marble under his feet began to quake, and in a moment he was descending through the floor. The entire catafalque and the floor around it was actually a lift, carrying him down a long, pitch-black shaft which opened up into a large atrium below.

Unlike the Ministry of Magic, this space was not warm or bustling. The ceiling was so low that it intruded unpleasantly into one's line of vision: even if you weren't particularly tall, you would almost subconsciously feel the urge to crouch as you walked through it. The windowless walls were made of reflective black onyx, aligned in a dizzying, repetitive tile pattern. The long hall was broken apart into a hundred narrow corridors containing an endless stream of locked doors. It was also noticeably frigid with suffocating, stale air, not just because it was underground but because of the five dementors who patrolled the perimeter.

There were a handful of witches and wizards moving down the corridors, most dressed in Unspeakable navy blue but some others in Healer lime green or in standard black. Most of them looked very pale and ill. Like their old coworker Rohan Belaji, they didn't have the stomach to do what they were doing, and the dementors' presence didn't just drain their patients' hope and resistance but theirs as well.

As soon as the lift landed, Lavrov leapt off of it, and it immediately retreated back to its original place upstairs. Immediately he was met by the five dementors, which stared at him out of the hollowness of their black hoods and sucked at the air beside him. The dementors greatly enjoyed the fact that everyone entering the Ward had to surrender their wand first.

The skull-eyed man fixed the dementors with a cool, condescending look. Then, in one sharp, abrupt move, he'd whipped Viktor's wand out of his robes.

"Diffindo!"

In a flash, he'd slashed one of the dementors' hands clean off.

The sound of a spell being cast made all of the Unspeakables and Healers in the vicinity whirl around, stiffening sharply. The dementor fell back, startled but clearly not hurt, and with an angry *whoosh*, it and the rest of the swarm all descended on Lavrov.

“Expecto Patronum!”

White burst from his wand, forming a falcon in mid-air that charged at the dementors in a focused assault. The swarm broke apart, shrieking furiously, and Lavrov dashed forward, snatching up the fallen dementor hand off the floor.

“EVERYONE, **MOVE!**” he bellowed.

A few witches and wizards screamed, leaping out of the way as he barreled down the hall. All of them had likewise been disarmed by the gate, so many didn’t find themselves capable of fighting back even if they wanted to. Some employees – the ones who were a little more supportive of the Ministry and their current positions than the others – tried to stop Lavrov by throwing potions or tackling him, but he ruthlessly blasted his way through, barreling down the twisting hallways to the room where the other fireplace was kept.

At long last, he reached it. Hoisting the corpse-like dementor hand up, Lavrov slapped it against the side of the fireplace, making the grate burst to life with blue flames.

A moment later, out of the flames came Viktor, Iskra, and Georgi, their faces all stretched into relieved grins.

“You did it!” said Georgi. “I never doubted you for an instant, *Lavrov* – ”

“That’s *not* my name, Georgi,” muttered the skull-eyed Auror.

He turned to Viktor. “*Gospoja* Montmercy is maintaining the other side?”

“I had to convince her,” Viktor admitted. “She vished to find her son.”

“Vell, ve’ll just have to do it for her,” said the man called Lavrov.

His eyes flashed to Iskra and Georgi.

“Go, now! We only have until the Aurors and Hitvizards finish with the Azkaban break-in!”

Chapter End Notes

The cemetery depicted most closely resembles the Kensal Green Cemetery in London -- they even have an old hydrolic lift in their chapel, which was once used to transport coffins from the chapel down to the catacombs underneath.

The Three Break-Ins

The remote island that was home to Azkaban was in chaos. Dementors swept around the perimeter, blanketing the rocks and sea with foreboding, blackish fog, as spell blasts and gunshots rang through the air.

Jengu led his battalion of Muggle “soldiers” through the endless stone halls of the wizard prison, his wand aloft to stabilize the impenetrable white shield he’d conjured around the group. Elijah was near the front, shooting at the walls in an attempt to fend off the small group of wizards who’d come to apprehend them. He was easily the best shot of those present, but he was a police officer and so wouldn’t fire without cause, particularly on people who had once worked alongside his wife, Hattie.

As the group dashed down the halls, they threw handmade grenades and used blowtorches to bust open the many cell doors.

“Come on!” Jengu cried to the freed prisoners through the smoke. “We’ve come to get you out of here! Stay close to me!”

The freed prisoners dashed after him, cheering in relief and delight. Jengu fished two wands that Elijah realized had belonged to two fallen Guilders out of his pant pocket and handed them to the healthiest-looking witch and wizard present. With new reinforcements in tow, the once-Healer turned a corner and continued to demolish the prison.

Meanwhile, at the Saeva Ward, the Bulgarians were likewise running down the winding halls, knocking every door off its hinges and saving every patient they could find. A few were too weak to run, so sometimes Iskra or Viktor would have to carry them back over to the black zircon fireplace themselves.

“Take her,” Iskra shot at Georgi sharply as she handed off a frail-looking fourteen-year-old girl with a black pixie cut.

Georgi scooped up the tiny girl, carrying her through the blue haze inside the fireplace. The man called Lavrov, who held his post with the dementor’s hand propped up against the side of the grate, looked at Iskra sharply.

“Any sign of Bridget Jaheem or Julien Montmercy?”

“Not yet – ”

Viktor came running up behind a group of freed patients, conjuring a Shield Charm around them to ward off the few Saeva Ward employees trying to prevent their escape.

“The patients spoke of a room in the East Ving,” he told them urgently, “one meant for patients that need ‘*reconditioning*’ – ”

“Sounds like the sort of place *Gospodin* Montmercy would find use in,” the skull-eyed Auror said darkly. “Get to the East Ving! Hurry!”

Within minutes sixty starved, exhausted, but no less exhilarated prisoners surrounded Jengu and his Muggle reinforcements. Even as the Aurors and Hit Wizards closed in, Jengu and the two prisoners he’d armed (Juliet Puddifoot and George Ketteridge) beat them back with help from Elijah and the other Muggles shooting bullets and throwing grenades.

Then, out of thin air, Antonin Dolohov arrived. The long-faced, dark-haired Death Eater who had been made Head of the Auror Department swept through the line of fire, raising his wand with a line of fiery red and yellow flames over his head.

“*GET DOWN!*” cried George Ketteridge, his eyes wide with fear.

Barely a second later Dolohov threw a wall of concentrated Fiendfyre across the hall. It melded into the shape of serpents, lions, chimaeras and dragons, which brought their massive jaws down upon ten wizards and witches who hadn’t reacted fast enough, and within minutes, they were all crumpling up on the floor, screaming in agony as they were burned away into ashes.

The group began to dissolve, with many of the prisoners and kidnapped Muggles running to escape the assault. The hall echoed with screams and Jengu tried desperately to keep order.

“STAY TOGETHER!” he cried, his sharp-lidded eyes wide with terror. “*STAY TOGETHER!*”

Dolohov ran forward, deadly green light blasting out of his wand in waves that struck some of the fleeing wizards and threw them to the ground. The youngest of the Muggles, a teenage boy with a nose ring, tried to leap out of the way, a flare of green just barely missing his ear.

His face blanching, Jengu ran forward with his wand raised. Yanking a massive piece of stone out of the wall with magic, he slammed it into the floor in front of Dolohov, throwing smoke and dust into the air. With Dolohov’s vision successfully obscured, Jengu was able to reach the Muggle boy and lead him back to the group.

“Stay close to me!”

Everyone clumped around Jengu. Elijah came up beside him, his handgun raised.

“Jacques,” he said sharply, “we have to retreat!”

Something almost desperate flared through Jengu’s eyes.

“No – no, not yet – !”

The smoke and dust were slowly dissipating. Dolohov whirled around, his dark eyes landing upon the Aurors and Hitwizards who had parted to let him through.

“Don’t just *stand* there!” he bellowed. “*Attack!*”

His subordinates flinched, but nonetheless followed orders, shooting Ministry-approved Stunners through the dusty air. Ketteridge summoned a Shield Charm, deflecting two of red spells before they could hit Elijah and Jengu.

“We’re out of time,” Ketteridge told Jengu, his round, blond-bearded face full of urgency. “Dolohov will kill every last one of us before he lets us escape – we must go, now – ”

“No!” Jengu repeated. His usually calm, measured voice cracked on the word, but his voice rang with resolve. “If we leave without Adrian, then this will have all been for nothing!”

His sharp-lidded eyes flaring with fire, he straightened up, materializing the largest shield as he could around the group like a whitish bubble. His voice rang with the low resonance of a dragon’s roar.

“Charge ahead!”

Viktor blasted the door at the end of the East Wing off its hinges. As soon as he entered, two lime-dressed Healers threw potions at him in an attempt to beat him back. The bottles collided with the wall behind Viktor and smashed open, the potions inside splashing against the stone and tile and leaving singed, acid-like holes. Without wands both of the Healers were Stunned within moments, and once they were immobilized, Viktor barreled past them to the table they’d been guarding.

Strapped onto the wood was a pale, sickly figure with shoulder-length blond hair dressed in a mint green patient’s gown, bound in magical manacles that licked at the air like bluish white flames. Several pitch-black bottles were set up around the table – Viktor recognized the potion inside at once as the Draught of Despair.

“Are you Julien Montmercy?” Viktor asked warily.

The name made the figure stiffen, his ice blue eyes growing very wide. Then his shoulders started to shake, tears streamed down his pallid face, and, within minutes, he’d broken down into full sobs.

“Yes,” he said emphatically. “**Yes.**”

His hard, hawk-like face contorting with pity, Viktor immediately waved his wand at Julien’s bonds, making them blow out like candles on a cake. Then he hoisted the taller man up onto his feet.

“Your mother is waiting for you,” Viktor told him. “Can you walk?”

Julien looked up sharply at Viktor's face, his cheeks blanching further. Then, his eyes narrowing sharply, he gave a firm nod and took a shaky step. He wasn't quite strong enough to support his full weight, and Viktor caught him before he could fall.

As quickly as he could, Viktor helped Julien hobble across the floor and down the hall. They both knew time was short.

The tide had turned against Jengu and his makeshift army. Dolohov was one of Lord Voldemort's most powerful subordinates and so easily outclassed Jengu in dueling prowess. George Ketteridge and Juliet Puddifoot were a little more experienced than Jengu, but considering they had been in dementor captivity for almost a year, their strength was in short supply. It wasn't long before the group of fugitives had been backed into a corner, trapped in a hallway that ended in a brick wall.

"We're trapped!" cried one of the Muggle women in terror.

Elijah came forward, taking two shots at Dolohov's head. The Death Eater wordlessly deflected both bullets, and Elijah darted back under Jengu's Shield Charm when his subordinates retaliated.

"I hope you have an idea, Jacques!" Elijah shot at him over his shoulder.

Jengu glanced down at the hall full of dark, lifeless cells.

Enrouge *had* to be in this wing of the prison – it was the only part they hadn't searched, and they'd gathered up every other prisoner who wasn't dead or Kissed –

He had to be there – he *had* to be –

"But one griffin...hath the body more great and is more strong than eight lions...of such lions as be on this half...and more great and stronger than an hundred eagles such as we have amongst us!"

A voice abruptly rang out from the floor overhead. It was hoarse, desperate, and almost insane, yet it vibrated with the passion of an artist and the idealism of a king.

Jengu looked up at the ceiling, his heart jumping into his throat as he raised his wand.

“*BOMBARDA!*” he cried.

The Healer blasted the stone over his head apart, thrusting the fragments at Dolohov and his entourage of Aurors and Hitwizards.

Out of the hole in the ceiling leapt a wizard in worn gray prison robes. He was a little older than Jengu with dark hair, a gaunt, square-shaped face, and sharp, piercing blue eyes behind a pair of broken rectangular glasses. As he straightened up beside Jengu, those piercing blue eyes flickered with a demented kind of light that resembled lightning.

“About time you all got here,” said Adrian Enrouge, his lips curled up in a broad smile. “I expect you brought my boat with the Undetectable Extension Charm?”

Jengu’s sharp-lidded eyes sparkled. “Of course – I had to make sure there was enough room for all of us...”

He handed Enrouge a wand from his pocket. The Guild of Griffins’ leader accepted it without looking at it, whirling on Dolohov with a vicious gleam in his eye. Then, in an almost inhumanly fast move, he lashed his wand arm out, wordlessly yanking the floor under his, Jengu’s, and their army’s feet up off of the ground, hoisting it into the air.

“*STOP THEM!*” shouted Dolohov.

Green and red flares shot through the air. Jengu, Ketteridge, and Mrs. Puddifoot blocked as many of them as they could as Enrouge safely lifted everyone upstairs, sealing the stone they were standing on top of to the floor they’d just arrived on.

“This way!” cried Enrouge.

Blasting his cell door off with a magical *BANG*, he led the group down the hallway at a run. None of them even dared to look back – all they could do was race as fast as their beating hearts, if they had any hope of reaching the exit and escaping.

Downstairs Dolohov whirled on his subordinates, ready to shout orders, when he suddenly felt a strange twinge in his arm.

Turning his back again, he yanked up his sleeve to reveal his Dark Mark, which was glowing yellowish-green.

“Antonin!” Montmercy’s voice slapped the air. The surrounding Aurors and Hitwizards gave a start at the sound. ***“The Ward has been breached! Send forces, now!”***

Fighting to contain his shock, outrage, and frustration, Dolohov traced the Dark Mark on his arm with his wand so as to reply.

“What?!” he bellowed. “I’ve already sent the rest of my department to Gringotts to deal with – !”

“My DAUGHTER is in there!” Montmercy cried back, his cold, urgent voice betraying some panic. ***“Send forces to the Ward NOW!”***

Dolohov’s lip curled in frustration, but he spat, “Understood!” and withdrew his arm. He then turned to the stunned Aurors and Hitwizards around him.

“What are you all staring at?” he snarled. “Never seen a Loqcutis Enchantment before?”

They all flinched back when the Death Eater strode forward, lashing out his arms and making his chocolate brown robes billow behind him.

“Hitwizards, escort a dementor to the fireplace on level one and proceed through the grate once it’s activated – capture all outside combatants, and kill the ones you can’t!”

Just as Viktor and Julien approached the black zircon fireplace, a foreboding *rumble* echoed overhead.

Iskra, who had just arrived yanking Donaghan Tremlett along after her, froze mid-step. Lavrov whirled on his compatriots, his eyes widening in horror.

“It’s the lift! Get them out of here, *now!*”

Georgi extended his hands: Viktor handed Julien off to him quickly, and Georgi carried him across. Then Viktor rushed to help Iskra with Tremlett – the longhaired bass player for the Weird Sisters, however, tried desperately to escape their grip.

“No, wait!” he said, his Irish-accented voice thick with anxiety. “I’ve got a friend down there! Yew can’t jus’ *leave* her there – she’s only a wee lass – !”

“You can’t help her vithout a vand!” Iskra shot him down, her voice harsh despite the pity on her face.

“*Ack* – leggo, yew harpie!” said Tremlett. “I tell yew, I’m not leavin’ without Bridget!”

The name made Lavrov stiffen abruptly.

“*Bridget Jaheem?*” he demanded. “Where is she? Where?!”

“In solitary!” Tremlett said, his small brown eyes watery with concern. “They’ve been lockin’ her up there off an’ on for months now – trying to break ‘er!”

Lavrov’s eyes narrowed sharply. “The end of the South Ving...ve must hurry – ”

“I’m coming with yew,” insisted Tremlett.

“No,” said Lavrov coldly. “You’re not.”

Without another word he Stunned Tremlett: the drummer dropped like a stone, and Iskra was forced to catch him.

“Take him through!” barked Lavrov.

With some difficulty, Iskra dragged Tremlett through the blue haze of the fireplace. Overhead there were several small explosions and some screams – Viktor and Lavrov both looked at each other in alarm.

“I thought one had to surrender their wand before entering!” said Viktor.

The man called Lavrov looked down at the floor, his mind working at a mile a minute as he tried to rationalize this. There must’ve been some sort of an exception – some sort of clearance he wasn’t privy to –

The fireplace gave a quiet *whoosh* as someone came through the grate...

But when Viktor and Lavrov looked up, expecting to find Iskra or Georgi, they instead found themselves face-to-face with a purple-dressed Hitwizard.

Barely having a second to think, Viktor wordlessly blocked the Hitwizard’s red Stunning Spell, before Disarming him and catapulting him into the wall. Lavrov dropped the dismembered dementor’s hand, and the magical blue haze inside the fireplace immediately vanished.

“No!” gasped Lavrov. “The grate in Azkaban! They’ve disrupted the connection!”

At that moment, a blond wizard in burgundy robes trimmed with gold came around the corner. It was Etienne Montmercy. At the sight of Viktor and his skull-eyed friend, his ice blue eyes widened with a kind of ferocity Lavrov had never seen.

“You!” cried Montmercy. “Where is my daughter?!”

Viktor fixed the Death Eater with a harsh expression. “Your *son* is safe – if nothing else, because he is now away from your demented attempt at reconditioning...did you truly expect him to be *happy* while being injected with the Draught of Despair?”

Montmercy’s face went as white as his son’s had been, but rather than make him look ill, it only served to make him look even more mad.

“*INCARCEROUS!*” he screamed.

Horrible black ropes leapt out of his wand like snakes. Lavrov, yanking the wand from the fallen Hitwizard off the ground, leapt in front of Viktor: in a flash, the ropes were Transfigured into colorful streamers that glided innocently to the floor.

Lavrov turned to Viktor, his skull-like eyes determined.

“Thank you for all of your help, my friend,” he said softly, bending down to pick up the dementor hand again. “But it will be hard enough to protect one person, let alone two.”

Viktor stiffened. “Vhat?”

Lavrov seized the dementor hand off the floor and slapped it against the grate; Viktor’s eyes widened and he raised both his wand and hand, trying to stop him.

“Ru – !”

But it was too late – without a word or any hesitation, Lavrov blasted Viktor with a burst of white light from his wand. The Bulgarian Seeker was catapulted off his feet, and he fell back through the fireplace and out of sight. Lavrov then set the dismembered hand he was holding on fire and threw it at Montmercy. The Senior Undersecretary dodged the greenish fireball, and Lavrov took the distraction to barrel past him and down the hall toward the South Wing.

His eyes smoldering with anger, Montmercy slashed his wand at the air, sending several grayish shadows across the floor and through the walls. Within moments the five dementors guarding the prison had swept through the darkness to his side.

“Reopen the fireplace!” Montmercy ordered.

One dementor glided forward; with a rattling breath, it raised a rotted, claw-like hand and placed it up against the black zircon grate, making it once again burst into bluish life. Seconds later four more Hitwizards emerged from the depths.

“Where does the other grate now let out?” demanded Montmercy. “Where is its location?”

One of the Hitwitches faltered. “I – I don’t know, sir – ”

“There was only one grate when we walked through,” another Hitwizard interjected, glancing around at his comrades. “...Gamp isn’t here – maybe he got through, before it closed – ”

This response did not please Montmercy at all. Breathing heavily, he looked around at his subordinates with wide, mad eyes.

“Seal all the exits,” he whispered in a voice so cold and hard it resembled frostbite. Then his tone rose to a harsher, louder pitch, “There’s one last traitor inside these walls – I want him to *never* escape them!”

Because Iskra, Georgi, and Antoinette had had to seal their grate upon being confronted with the Ministry Hitwizard called Gamp, Viktor had unfortunately *also* been redirected to the only remaining grate. He landed in the middle of Azkaban prison, surrounded by about ten Hitwizards.

Once he’d realized where he was and how much danger he was in, Viktor forced his way out of the crowd as quickly as his clumsy, bowed legs would allow him, shooting curses over his shoulder.

He needed to Apparate back to their hideout...but he couldn’t do that as long as he was trapped within Azkaban’s walls...

Viktor plunged a hand into his robes, yanking out a very small model broomstick. With a flick of his wrist and a wave of his wand, the tiny toy grew into a full-size Firebolt, and without breaking out of his strides, Viktor hoisted a leg up and over it and kicked off from the ground.

It was challenging to fly through the narrow halls of a prison, but Viktor had always been much more graceful and much faster in the air, and sure enough, he was soon able to blaze down the hallways and dodge his opponents' spells with the speed and grace of a comet.

At long last Enrouge, Jengu, Elijah, and the others made it outside. Jengu waved his wand at the nearby rocks, and out of the waves emerged the blue and white houseboat that Enrouge had enchanted to fit a hundred people, if need be.

"Get in! Quickly!" said Enrouge. "We must make it to shore, if we have any intention of Disapparating!"

Everyone began piling inside – Mrs. Puddifoot immediately climbed onto the boat bobbing lightly up and down in the water so she could help the other, more infirm prisoners board, while Elijah and Ketteridge held the perimeter.

Enrouge turned to Jengu at last, his gaunt square face still spread in the smile that had not once faltered since he'd appeared.

"I *knew* you could do it, Jacques," he said with a kind of vicious pride. "And look at what you've done – you've brought Muggles and wizards together, as one whole – one army!"

Jengu's smile flickered and died.

"Adrian..." he started.

But Enrouge didn't seem to hear him. He'd turned toward the crowd of prisoners and Muggles piling into the ship, his hand indicating them proudly. As he looked them over, however, his smile slowly faded.

"...Where is Arachne?" he asked Jengu.

Jengu's eyes flared with shame. "Adrian..."

"Where are Liza and Thomas? Berach? Eli? Ramona – ?"

"They're gone, Adrian," Jengu cut him off weakly.

Enrouge looked up at Jengu, his blue eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

"...After you left," said Jengu, "we tried to do as you said and recruit Muggles to our cause, but... but they weren't interested. They were scared of the War – they were scared of *us* – so we – we had to *force* them to join, like you thought we might have to...and sometimes when we'd force them..."

Jengu's eyes shut tight as he tried in vain to contain his grief.

"They're gone, Adrian...*all* of them...I couldn't save any of them..."

Enrouge looked down at the wand in his hand and then up at Jengu's face, his lightning-like eyes unreadable. Then he brought a hand down onto the younger man's shoulder, squeezing tight.

"It's all right, Jacques," he murmured. "We all are meant to die, in our own time. Is that not the moral of the *Tale of the Three Brothers*, for us not to fear Death, but embrace it? Our friends are gone, but they did not die in vain. We are here – the *Guild* is here – and thanks to their sacrifice, we now have the forces needed to tear down this hollow, corrupted world and begin one anew."

"*Forces?*"

Both wizards looked up at Elijah, who broke away from the perimeter Ketteridge and he had set up to confront the two. Judging by the look on the Muggle bobby's face, he had clearly heard every word.

"I damn well hope you don't mean *these* people," he said sharply.

He threw a hand up to gesture to the weak, injured witches and wizards Mrs. Puddifoot was helping onto the boat.

Enrouge appeared perfectly undaunted. “Of course I do. These people, more than any others, have enough cause to see the Death Eaters destroyed.”

“The only people here strong enough to even use magic at all are George and Juliet,” Elijah said. Ketteridge and Ms. Puddifoot looked up at the sound of their names, and many of the other prisoners’ eyes were drawn to Elijah and Enrouge too. “And even then, they’re in no fit shape to fight You-Know-Who! They need to be *protected*, not drafted into service!”

“Anyone who would refuse to fight to save the world from the Death Eaters,” said Enrouge with an almost maddening level of conviction, “doesn’t deserve a place in it.”

Elijah’s green eyes flared. The righteous fury in his expression brought back the memory of his son, Kevin, and Jengu flinched visibly.

“How *dare* you!” the Muggle bobby said, his hushed voice shaking with the effort of him trying to contain his emotions. “How *dare* you act like you get to decide who lives or dies! ‘*Anyone who doesn’t fight deserves to die*’ – no wonder your officers felt they had to *kidnap random Muggles*, if you’re the sort to force the Death Eaters’ victims to fight them or die – ”

The indignant, flushed face of Ron Weasley rippled through Jengu’s mind.

“So you’ll force them to fight or die, then?”

“We’re all going to die,” Enrouge said, his lightning-like eyes flickering despite the almost serene coolness of his face. “We just may as well make that death worthwhile.”

Jengu’s sharp-lidded eyes darted to Enrouge, rippling concern. “Adrian – ”

Before Jengu could say anything else, the land under their feet quaked. All of a sudden the rocks along the coast ripped themselves up and out of the water, cutting the shore off from the houseboat and setting it adrift.

“No!” cried Jengu.

Mrs. Puddifoot, still on board the houseboat, raised her wand and summoned a rope of white light, which she lashed to the rocks in an attempt to anchor it. Scarlet and black curses shot through the air, signaling the arrival of Dolohov. There were even more Aurors behind him than before, as well as several other wizards dressed in black and shooting off Killing Curses – no doubt unmasked Death Eaters.

The sight of the Death Eaters made Enrouge’s blue eyes flare with a vicious kind of delight.

“So they’re scared enough that they’ll come to us like pigs to the slaughter!” he cried, his brilliant, king-like voice echoing with a demented delusion of grandeur. “To arms!”

He raised his wand – Ketteridge and Elijah both abruptly straightened up, before wordlessly dashing after Enrouge into the fray.

Jengu watched the three go, horrified.

“Wait – no – ”

Mad delight gleamed on Enrouge’s face and he and Ketteridge started firing hexes and curses off in all directions, while Elijah fired indiscriminately. Green Killing Curses crashed around them, barely missing Enrouge’s head and Elijah’s left shoulder.

“NO!”

Conjuring a shield around all of them, Jengu seized Enrouge’s arm, trying to pull him back. Both Ketteridge and Elijah froze where they stood, as if they had both suddenly been turned to stone.

Enrouge was so taken aback by Jengu grabbing him that he reacted with anger.

“What are you *doing*?!”

“Adrian, we have to get out of here – we’re outmatched – ”

“This is our moment!” Enrouge cried manically, his lightning-like eyes blazing. “We don’t have to Disapparate to the Ministry now – *they’re here* – we have the power – we have the men – ”

“You used the *Imperius Curse*!” said Jengu, clearly upset. “How could you – !?”

“We can kill them – we can destroy them – turn this broken, ruined, evil world to dust and build up our own better world – ”

“If you fight, then you’ll die!” Jengu shouted desperately. “I *can’t* let you die!”

In a mad, furious move, Enrouge raised his wand and blasted Jengu in the chest, knocking him backwards. He charged forward, right toward the cluster of Death Eaters –

All of a sudden, out of the clear blue sky, a hawk-like wizard on a broomstick dove toward the ground, blasting silver sparks at the Aurors and Death Eaters below. Both groups withdrew sharply – the shock distracted Enrouge enough that his magical hold on Elijah and Ketteridge disappeared. The two men both shook their heads, disoriented.

Viktor flew down beside Elijah, Ketteridge, and the two Guilders, one hand on his broom and the other holding his wand aloft.

“I think we have wasted more than enough time here,” he said coolly.

He conjured up a bridge of yellowish light connecting the houseboat to the rocks.

“Hurry! Go!”

Enrouge whirled on Viktor with ferocity. “You coward! You think I – ”

But George Ketteridge had had enough. Coming up behind Enrouge, he wordlessly Stunned him. The leader of the Guild of Griffins stiffened sharply, then collapsed in a heap on the ground.

“I said *go*,” Viktor repeated a little more harshly.

Jengu tried desperately to get to his feet, cradling his bleeding chest, but the pain made him crumple in on himself. Elijah ran forward, pulling the younger man’s arm up over his shoulder.

“Hold onto me,” he said softly.

He glanced at Ketteridge. “Can you get Enrouge?”

“Yes,” said Ketteridge gravely.

With a flick of his wand, he levitated Enrouge off the ground and carried him to the boat on the other side. Elijah turned to Viktor, his expression touched with a warm smile.

“Thank you.”

Viktor inclined his head in a short, respectful nod. Then he took off again, shooting more red and silver curses at the Aurors and Death Eaters below as he soared away, higher and farther out to sea.

With some help from Ketteridge, Elijah hoisted Jengu up over the rocks onto the boat.

“Set sail, Juliet!” he cried.

Mrs. Puddifoot withdrew her wand, making the magical white rope vanish, and at once the boat was set adrift on the wild ocean waves.

“Don’t let them get away!” Elijah heard Dolohov roar in the distance.

Jengu gritted his teeth in pain as he tried to raise his wand arm over his head. Elijah immediately reached forward and grabbed hold of his arm in one hand to help him lift it.

“*A-Aqua Reditus*,” choked Jengu.

And in a crash of waves, the boat descended, encapsulated in a perfect bubble of cold blue water as it disappeared into the ocean.

Three Hitwizards doggedly pursued the skull-eyed Auror as he weaved in and out of various halls to get to the South Wing. Lavrov slashed at the air with his wand, cutting open locks and slamming open doors as he went. At one point a Hitwitch succeeded in blocking off a hallway by tearing down a wall, forcing Lavrov to change direction. Taking another two turns, he took a Decoy Denonator from his pocket and, without breaking his stride, chucked it down one of the halls. He ducked around the next corner, waited for the Hitwizards to pursue the Detonator, and then backtracked to another corridor that led to the South Wing.

The South Wing was the coldest, darkest, and most removed of the Ward’s branches. Its black-tiled walls didn’t hold an endless line of doors like in the other hallways: Lavrov had to walk all the way down the empty, dizzying passage in order to find the only three doors in the Wing, which were all encrusted in dozens of thick silver locks and chains.

Upon reaching the three doors, Lavrov pointed his wand at each of them in turn, over and over. Little fiery, magical embers landed on the doors, connecting together in lines that grew and expanded to cover the entire back of the hall. The light went from white to yellow to dangerous red, before the line of embers exploded like a hundred tiny firecrackers.

Lavrov barreled blindly into the gray smoke, holding the sleeve of his robes up over his nose and mouth to help him breathe. As he blinked through the ash, he caught the sound of someone coughing to his left.

“Bridget?” he called. “Bridget Jaheem?”

The coughing halted abruptly. Then it started again when its owner called back,

“*H-here!* I’m here!”

Lavrov lit his wand and held it aloft: through the shadows he could just barely make out the shape of someone curled up on the floor. Barreling forward, he swept the smoke away to find a dark-

skinned teenage girl with a long, messy mane of curly black hair and bright black eyes.

Lavrov beamed at the sight of her, his unattractive, skull-like face brightening as he bent down beside her.

“Thank goodness,” he said.

Bridget’s eyes narrowed upon the stranger’s face. “Who are you?”

Lavrov opened his mouth to respond, but he stilled when he heard a series of shouts coming down the hall. His head shot up and he looked over his shoulder – the Hitwizards were closing in –

He turned to Bridget urgently.

“Can you walk?”

Bridget’s black eyes shot from the long corridor to Lavrov’s face, rippling in anxiety and pain. Unable to speak, she miserably indicated her lower half.

Her legs were crumpled up beside her at a grotesque angle. They were covered in sickening blue and yellow bruises, and several fragments of bloodstained, ivory-colored bone stuck out from her flesh.

Lavrov couldn’t fight back a wince, his eyes narrowing sharply. She couldn’t even *stand* in such a state...

“Wrap your arms around my neck,” he instructed her.

Bridget did so, and Lavrov picked her up as if she were a little girl demanding a piggyback ride. He could only carry one of her legs since he had to leave his wand hand free, but he was just barely able to hoist her up onto his back.

“Hang on,” he said.

He set off at a run. As the Hitwizards confronted them, Lavrov attacked with every curse in his arsenal, including the more vindictive form of the Conjunctivitis Curse he'd taught Viktor during the Triwizard Tournament. He beat them back, blowing open walls and creating backdoor routes that could take them back to the main lobby.

After what felt like a dozen turns and hundreds of tiny explosions, Lavrov and Bridget finally reached the central atrium. Once he'd secured Bridget more tightly to his back, Lavrov hurtled across the flat, empty floor. There was no cover on the way back to the lift – if he stopped, then he wouldn't make it there at all –

“ON YOUR RIGHT!” shouted Bridget.

Lavrov whirled around, but he wasn't quite fast enough to dodge the fiery slash of purple magic that Montmercy had flung from his wand. It collided with his left shoulder, throwing them both backward as it embedded itself into his flesh.

“ACK!”

His wand clattered to the floor when Lavrov dropped Bridget, clutching his injured shoulder. Even though there was no blood, his shoulder and upper arm quaked with spasms of white-hot pain: it felt like something was slashing through his shoulder from the inside like a hot, dull knife.

“Are you okay?” Bridget said at once, rushing to try to help.

There was no time for Lavrov to answer – in an instant, Montmercy had appeared over them, raising his wand.

Bridget, despite her injured legs, lunged forward over her fallen rescuer to grab hold of the wand he'd dropped and pointed it right between the Death Eater's eyes.

“*Expelliarmus!*”

The force of Bridget's scarlet spell hit Montmercy full on in the face, breaking his nose with an audible *CRACK* and chucking him backwards. The Senior Undersecretary collided with the far

wall back first, his wand spiraling out of his hand.

Gritting his teeth in pain, Lavrov hoisted Bridget up onto his good arm. Once she was secure, he carried her with a little more difficulty toward the lift, even as more Stunning spells from the arriving Hitwizards flashed overhead.

“*Averte Sactum!*” Bridget cast spells over Lavrov’s good shoulder at their opponents. “*Locomotor Mortis! Petrificus Totalus!*”

At last Lavrov hoisted both himself and Bridget onto the base of the lift. It rose up in response to their weight, levitating the two off the ground and back toward the chapel above. Impediment Jinxes and magical wires flew up at the ceiling, but try as the Hitwizards might to halt the lift’s ascension, Bridget hoisted her top half over the edge of the lift and summoned Shield Charms to block the spells.

“*Protego! Protego!*”

Lavrov squeezed his shoulder, clenching his teeth as he struggled to suppress the pain. He glanced up at the ceiling about four feet away, which was opening like a set of automatic doors for them.

They were almost there – almost free – !

Montmercy dashed in front of the horde of Hitwizards, blood spurting freely from his broken nose and his ice blue eyes wide with rage as he raised his retrieved wand.

“*EXPULSO!*” he roared.

Bridget hurried to block the blast of neon blue light, but alas, the curse colliding with her Shield Charm was strong enough that it sent terrible shock waves through the lift. A huge crack formed in the base.

His skull-like eyes widening in horror, Lavrov dived forward, seizing Bridget around the waist with his good arm.

“Levitate us! *Now!*”

Just as Montmercy fired again, Bridget quickly swished and flicked her wand at her and her comrade’s chests.

“*WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!*”

The lift shattered into pieces, which came down on Montmercy and the Hitwizards in large pointed shards and made them scatter. Rather than falling alongside the rubble, however, Lavrov and Bridget were hovering in mid-air, wobbling shakily as they floated up just enough for them both to seize hold of the edge of the hole in the ceiling and hoist themselves up and out.

Once they reached the chapel floor, the podium behind the catafalque spat out Lavrov’s wand, which he seized in mid-air. He lashed it at the floor behind them.

BANG!

The opening leading to the Saeva Ward started to crumble: Lavrov also snatched up one of the benches from the pew and threw it over the hole, setting it ablaze with green flames in an attempt to hinder their pursuers.

“*Mobilicorpus!*” he said, waving his wand at Bridget.

At once ghostly white strings flowed out of his wand and lifted her up off the ground, and Lavrov pulled her along after him as if she were a balloon.

“Ve’ll need to use Side-Along Apparition once we leave the chapel!” said Lavrov as he ran with some difficulty to the door. “I’ll need you to hold onto me, when I bring you down – ”

BAM! WHOOSH!

The exit to the lift exploded, sending green flames in a deadly wave across the room. Lavrov leapt out of the chapel door, yanking Bridget towards him in mid-air.

“Hold on!”

Bridget grabbed his arm, and in a flurry of contorting limbs and sickening colors, she and Lavrov vanished before they ever touched the ground.

Far away, in the wizarding village of Diagon Alley, a sickly white dragon smashed through the domed ceiling of the impenetrable magical bank, Gringotts. On its back were the three young conspirators who had breached its walls and successfully broken into the vault of Bellatrix Lestrange - Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, and the Boy Who Lived, Harry Potter. Because the three break-ins had happened almost in tandem, Thicknesse, Dolohov and Montmercy had had to split the Department of Magical Law Enforcement into three parts, leaving Dolores Umbridge in charge of affairs until their return.

Little did Umbridge or her superiors realize that their troubles had only just begun.

The Tide Turns

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Percy Weasley had been working pretty much non-stop since he'd arrived at work that morning. He'd received a total of seventy-three owls in the span of six hours from not only the Minister but also Antonin Dolohov and Etienne Montmercy, all while also having to write and send about over thirty interdepartmental memos dictated to him by Dolores Umbridge. Although he'd had little to no time to examine the letters closely, through the memos he'd had to send he could glean bits and pieces of what was going on.

'There have been three break-ins,' deduced Percy as he quickly enchanted five more memos directed to the Mastiffs and the Department of International Magical Cooperation. 'One at Azkaban, arranged by Jacques Jengu and the Guilders – one at Gringotts, arranged by someone disguised as Bellatrix Lestrange – and the last...'

He frowned. That last break-in had given him the most pause. Montmercy had been deliberately vague about his location and where the Hit Wizard reinforcements were being sent, but he clearly was distressed, demanding that all Ministry staff who had emigrated from Bulgaria in the last year be immediately arrested and sounding the alarm that "his precious daughter Lydia" had been kidnapped. Julien hadn't been seen in public since his and Cuffe's wedding, where he had accused his father of murdering three people that had to be Eddie, Roger, and Arjuna, and Percy and Marietta had been starved for news about his whereabouts, given that they were now the only people left at the Ministry to take up the Abraxans' cause.

'There's only one place that Julien could've been broken out of,' thought Percy, 'and that's the Saeva Ward. Only Montmercy and the rest of the Ministry don't want news of the Ward to get out – if everyone knew about it, and what it was really doing –'

"Weasley!"

Percy stiffened abruptly.

Dolores Umbridge once again strode into the room, adorned in obnoxious pink velvet robes with a matronly collar and holding out another violet-colored memo. Two young staffers flocked her on either side.

"Memo to the Obliviators," she said, her high-pitched voice very sharp, "first priority!"

“Yes, Madam,” said Percy at once.

Umbridge practically threw the memo in Percy’s face before bustling out of the room, fixing her hair as she went.

“Has Uric arrived?” she asked one of the staffers as she left.

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Good – see that he’s near the front...”

Once Umbridge had left the room, Percy looked down at the memo he’d just received.

All Obliviators –

Your presence is needed in the main hall, outside of the security checkpoints. Escort team of Hitwizards (9) that shall arrive within the hour to interrogation room for mind cleansing. DO NOT allow contact between Hitwizards and any other MOM employee or member of the press before cleanse. DO NOT attempt to interrogate Hitwizards about their top-secret activities.

Signed,

Dolores Jane Umbridge

Head of MASTIF

Ministry of Magic

Percy’s heart convulsed.

‘The Hit Wizards were with Montmercy,’ he realized in horror. ‘They were the ones sent to that mystery location – to the Saeva Ward!’

His entire life, Percy had been the rule-follower of the Weasley clan. Whereas his siblings had always revelled in rebellion, the third oldest Weasley had been more cautious and prim and had been more interested in study and politics than in sports or socializing. He had always taken it upon himself to set the best example and to uphold the principles of the institution he lived in, whether it was Hogwarts as a prefect and Head Boy or the Ministry as Junior Undersecretary. The entire reason Percy had agreed to join the Abraxans in the first place was, strangely enough, because the Ministry was under threat by the people who'd taken it over – it was less to try to fight the system and more to protect it, and fortunately people like Roger and Eddie had been very sympathetic to the Junior Undersecretary's motivations. Percy knew that he couldn't just rashly blare out his objections to the new order without being labeled a traitor and being locked up in Azkaban, and so he'd bitten his lip for almost a year, letting everyone from Montmery to Umbridge walk over him. It had been very hard on Percy's pride, but it'd been helpful to have friends like Julien and Marietta, who could reassure him that endurance and resistance were nobler than dying without purpose.

Percy had always followed the rules...but in that moment, he knew what he had to do. And so rather than deliver the memo like Umbridge had ordered him to, he tucked it into his brown hound's-tooth robes and left his office.

Cho put on the bravest face she could as she and her American coworkers piled into the red phone booth that served as the visitor's entrance to the British Ministry of Magic. It took about five minutes for the enchanted phone operator to verify that yes, they had the clearance to enter; when it finally did, the phone spat out three large, hot pink buttons into its collection tray. They were emblazoned with bright white words that flashed, line by line, in a constant cycle:

AMERICAN ENVOY:

MACUSA,

DEPARTMENT OF MAGICAL GAMES AND SPORTS

Once the three buttons were removed from the tray, the enchanted phone booth began to descend through the ground.

Cho glanced at Tokala. His current disguise was that of a dashing wizard with broad shoulders and dirty blond hair named Lance Fontaine.

The Head of Major Investigations offered Cho a small wry smile as he fastened the button to the front of his black-trimmed white robes.

“Their security measures seem a bit tighter.”

The last member of their entourage, a very pretty witch with blue-black hair and smoky dark eyes named Mia Romero, frowned critically.

“*Que chafa!*” she muttered. Her nose wrinkled as she reluctantly attached her button to her own crimson-colored robes. “They must want to be able to spot us from miles off – that way everyone who sees us will know to be on their best behavior...”

Swallowing the nervous lump that had cropped up in her throat, Cho fastened the button to her flowery navy blue robes.

The phone booth emerged from the blackness of the concrete ground, drifting down like a free-floating elevator into the atrium below. The three MACUSA employees peeked through the windows and gave a start at what they saw under them.

“What’s with all those lines?” asked Mia.

“Those must be the security lines,” Cho recalled Astoria mentioning how much her father hated going through them just to get into work, “but it looks like they’re stopped dead...”

The phone booth landed lightly on the polished, tile floor just behind the lines. Tokala immediately climbed out, and Cho and Mia followed closely behind.

“Get out your cards,” Tokala murmured under his breath. “We’re not going to dawdle around here.”

The three strode forward, bypassing the lines. When they reached the front, a pink-dressed MASTIF agent tried to stop them, but Tokala cut him off with a voice that was much more innocent and charming than his usual dry monotone.

“International envoy from the Magical Congress of the United States,” he said, as he flashed the purple ID card he’d had printed for Lance Fontaine and Mia and Cho similarly held up theirs. “We’re here to see Minister Thicknesse.”

The freckled Mastiff looked anxiously at each ID card.

“M-Minister Thicknesse has been called out on urgent business,” he said nervously. “Madam Umbridge has been...filling in for him.”

“Oh!” said Tokala. “All right, then, we’ll see her. Would you direct us, please?”

Looking if possible even more nervous, the Mastiff glanced over his shoulder.

“She’s...having a press conference – b-but I’m sure that she’ll see you, if you w-wait by the Minister’s office...at the back of the hall – ”

“Thanks a lot!” Tokala cut him off with an uncharacteristically bright smile.

He, Cho, and Mia strolled through, quickly putting distance between themselves and the MASTIF agents.

“You don’t have to put on such a good act, Tokala,” Mia muttered amusedly. “These people don’t know the real Lance – they probably never will...”

Tokala raised his eyebrows dully. “I never half-ass anything, Ms. Romero.”

He looked around, his blue-disguised eyes narrowing as he took in the rest of the atrium. When his gaze reached the right side, he stiffened slightly.

“Look there – at the far end.”

The two women turned. Set up at the corner of the hall was a podium surrounded by a small crowd: a short woman with a toad-like face dressed in obnoxious pink was addressing the assembled witches and wizards, her paunchy eyes skipping over them all from above.

“That’s Umbridge,” Cho said at once.

“ – to the efforts made by a group of malcontent, pro-Guilder, anti-Ministry agitators,” Umbridge declared, her voice dripping with a kind of sickening righteousness that reminded Cho of a petulant child railing against her parents taking away a favorite toy, “the Wizarding World has been held hostage – ”

The crowd surrounding her rumbled with various sounds, some agreeing, some confused, and some angry.

“Settle down, settle *down*,” Umbridge scolded lightly as if she were a disapproving parent scolding a rowdy child, “I’m the one speaking, so you’ll just have to wait your turn – ”

Mia scoffed.

“Classic disinformation technique,” she murmured to Cho when the British witch looked at her questioningly. “Say something blatantly offensive to bait the opposition, then act like *you’re* being the reasonable one when they get emotional. It’s a good way to get the subject off something you don’t want people to examine too closely. Just watch, if anyone still tries to call her out on what she said, then she’ll act like *they’re* the ones who’ve said something offensive.”

“Madam Umbridge, there are reports that there are *three* break-ins going on,” cried out one witch fearfully, “what should I say to my staff if they ask – ?”

“Are you insinuating that my intelligence, as the head of the Magical Agents for Tracking and Investigating Felonies, is *wrong*?” demanded Umbridge sweetly.

The witch gaped in horror. “*No!* No, ma’am, I – !”

“Ah, then you think to call me a liar?” Umbridge said sharply. “Are you suggesting that my *entire* department – that all of our Mastiffs, Aurors, and Hitwizards who risk their lives in the field every day to keep us safe – are *deceiving* you?”

“Called it,” said Mia.

Tokala's eyes drifted over Umbridge, glinting like embers on his unreadable face.

"It's worse than I thought," he said. "Did you notice that there are only three reporters in that crowd? And they're all dressed in the same color robes, like they're from the same paper."

Cho had noticed. Leading that trio was curly-haired, weasel-faced Uric Cuffe, dressed in messily unbuttoned army green robes. He looked just like the picture that had been enclosed with his first editorial in the *Daily Prophet*.

"That means they'll be putting out this information completely unchallenged," said Mia.

A tall man with a neatly styled short red hair, high-necked hound's-tooth robes, and horn-rimmed glasses abruptly walked past the American envoy, barely giving them a glance.

"Excuse me," he said brusquely.

For a split second, Cho and the man made eye contact. Behind his glasses was a startlingly familiar set of blue eyes, framed by copious freckles: eyes that made him strongly resemble another man who Cho hadn't seen in person since her graduation...

'Ron?'

thought Cho with a start.

"Madam Umbridge," said a low, resonant voice.

It was Kingsley Shacklebolt. The well-regarded Auror had just made it past the long lines of Ministry employees still waiting to be examined, his gold and emerald green robes billowing behind him. He towered over the mob of Ministry employees with ease as he regarded Umbridge at her podium.

The MASTIF Head's paunchy face seemed to contort slightly at the sight of Kingsley, almost as if she was intimidated, but then she put on her very best toad-like smile.

"Ah, Shacklebolt!" she said, her voice laced with insincere brightness. "Good that you're here! The remainder of the Aurors have been called to Azkaban – report there and –"

“No need,” said Kingsley. “I’ve already been there.”

The assembled employees and journalists shot anxious looks at each other, exchanging whispers. Umbridge faltered.

“You – you have?”

A second later, deciding to recompose herself, she quickly plastered on another smile, much more strained this time, and said, “Then – then you have news of Antonin! Excellent, we’ll – we’ll retire to my office and discuss – ”

“There won’t be enough room in your office for *all* of us, I’m afraid,” said Kingsley coolly.

As he spoke, a line of about eight more scarlet-dressed Aurors appeared behind him. Some of them looked quite angry – others looked almost ill.

Umbridge’s smile quaked slightly.

“Oh – it won’t be necessary to...hear *everyone’s* accounts – Antonin’s report will be more than sufficient – he *is* your superior – ”

Her pouch-like eyes darted around. Clearly she was looking for Dolohov, assuming he’d be with the Aurors assembled, but he wasn’t.

“Mr. Dolohov is still leading the remainder of our ranks back at the prison,” Kingsley said, easily treading over Umbridge without raising his voice in the slightest. Like Dumbledore, he had a remarkable talent for commanding an audience’s attention without increasing his volume. “So I’m afraid *our* account will have to come first – ”

Uric Cuffe, who had been stunned silent up until this point, abruptly strode right up to Kingsley, trying to get up in his face.

“Do you mean to say you *abandoned* your commanding officer!?” he interrogated him fiercely. The reporters with him took several pictures of Kingsley, and blinding flashes overtook the loudly muttering crowd. “Do you admit *open treason* – leaving the gates of Azkaban ajar, sending dangerous criminals back out into our world?!”

Despite the loud frenzy Cuffe rallied the mob of employees into, the puny, curly-haired reporter still looked rather pathetic standing in front of tall, broad-chested Kingsley. Some of the Aurors surrounding Kingsley reacted more angrily to Cuffe’s insinuation: they started yelling right back at him.

“*Treason?!?*”

“You little rat – ”

“How *dare* you – !”

Cuffe immediately took a step back, whirling on the rest of the crowd with a wounded, indignant expression.

“You see?!?” he cried. “Now they’re threatening a member of the press! Let these lunatics have their way, and all free and balanced journalists will be *silenced!*”

Kingsley raised his eyebrows. “I was unaware that there were any journalists present.”

“Mr. Shackbolt – ” Umbridge started, her voice seething with rage, but Kingsley once again cut her off with ease.

“Madam Umbridge, would you care to explain why the Head of our Auror Department would be using a *Dark Mark* to communicate with our Senior Undersecretary?”

Everyone immediately hushed. Cho shot looks at Tokala and Mia. Mia looked back at her with shock, and Tokala silently gestured to both of them to stay quiet.

“He – ” stammered Umbridge, clearly taken aback, “he didn’t – because he doesn’t have one – but

of course that wouldn't be a problem – that is, the Dark Mark – as you know, it was once the symbol of an ancient order – ”

“Both of them had been accused of being Death Eaters,” said Kingsley plainly, “but upon their appointments, they vehemently denied the accusations. Their goal – like yours, and Corban Yaxley's, and Antony Greengrass's, and Europa Bulstrode's – was to serve the Wizarding World...not the will of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.”

“It is,” said Umbridge very quickly, “we all live to serve our constituents, that is to say, you, and everyone else – and really, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is *also* – ”

“And *what*,” Kingsley plowed on, his voice never rising despite its strength, “is the ‘Ward’ that our Hitwizard coworkers have been sent to, on our Senior Undersecretary's orders?”

“I've never heard of such a place in my life!” Umbridge said indignantly. “How *dare* you bring forward such false, baseless accusations – !”

“It's called the Saeva Ward!”

Everyone whirled around. Cho's eyes widened as the bespectacled red-haired young man from before strode forward, leading a group of nine violet-dressed Hitwizards, all of whom looked very pale and nauseous.

“You might have first heard about it in the Abraxans' pamphlets,” Percy shouted so that everyone could hear him, “first discovered and reported by R.J. Moon! It's been labeled as a medical ward, but in truth, it's been used to detain Muggle-borns, Squibs, and other witches and wizards and use them as *test subjects* to prove the Ministry's new positions on blood superiority! These witches and wizards saw the place with their own eyes, but out of fear came back to the Ministry to await further orders – ”

Percy's blue eyes flashed through his glasses at Umbridge as he withdrew the purple memo from the inside of his robes, holding it out for everyone to see.

“Of course they didn't know that once they arrived, they were meant to be confronted by a team of Obliviators and escorted out of the public eye, so that their minds could be wiped of everything they just saw! Madam Umbridge wished to *bury* all knowledge of the Saeva Ward and its activities by erasing the information from these people's minds!”

The outcry at this was deafening. Everyone was suddenly screaming in outrage.

“Oblivate *Hitwizards*?”

“They’re officers – ”

“ – no warrant – ”

“ – meant to Oblivate *Muggles*, not wizards - ”

“ – Oblivate *us* next!”

“*SILENCE!*” screamed Umbridge, but it didn’t come to much: everyone was too furious to listen to her. The Head of MASTIF looked whiter and more furious than anyone had ever seen her. Her toad-like eyes bulged upon Percy as she whipped out her wand, raising it threateningly.

WHAM!

Out of nowhere, Cho barreled forward, summoning a Shield Charm around herself and Percy. Umbridge’s curse bounced off of it and rebounded back at her, colliding with the wall just over her head.

“How DARE you!” shrieked Umbridge. “Interfering with an arrest is a criminal offense!”

She raised her wand again. Tokala and Mia jumped protectively in front of Cho, but before they could magically retaliate, a pink-dressed witch with curly orange hair dashed forward, flicking her wand at the air. The spell collided with Umbridge’s wrist, making her wand go flying out of her stubby little hand.

“If I’m not mistaken, *Madam*, tampering with evidence, aiding known Death Eaters, and working against one’s own country are *also* criminal offenses,” snarled Marietta Edgecombe. “Dolores Jane Umbridge, you are under arrest!”

Within seconds, the mob of employees devolved around Umbridge. Unfortunately, thanks to her size, it wasn't incredibly difficult for the toad-like witch to snatch back her wand and disappear into the melee, but once she broke away and ran toward the fireplaces, Kingsley and Tokala took off at a run after her. Umbridge lashed spells over her shoulder at them, which Kingsley blocked – Tokala lashed his wand at the ground so as to catapult himself up into the air like a rocket. Flipping himself over in mid-air, he then kicked off from the ceiling, throwing himself back toward Umbridge a ways below.

“Partum Carcerem!”

Kingsley had to screech to a halt as a series of magical bars sprouted out of the ground, ensnaring Umbridge in a large cage.

“Reducto!” cried Umbridge angrily.

BAM!

An explosion rang out of her wand, but the bars were left unscathed. Kingsley took Umbridge's shocked hesitation to nonverbally Disarm her.

“Much obliged,” Kingsley said to Tokala with a smile once the MACUSA wizard had levitated himself leisurely back to the ground.

Tokala inclined his blond-disguised head respectfully. “It was my pleasure – honestly, I was thrilled when you all finally shut her up.”

“We should've done it a long time ago,” said Kingsley lowly.

“Yes, you should have,” agreed Tokala breezily. “But I suppose there's some value in doing it right, as opposed to tipping your hand too soon and losing it all.”

Kingsley nodded solemnly as Mia strode up to them, dragging Uric Cuffe along behind her by the messy neck of his army green robes.

“I thought that *this* guy might also be someone you should talk to,” she said dryly. “From what I understand, he also has had friendly relations with the Death Eater suspects in question, yes?”

Wand-less and defenseless, Cuffe nonetheless tried to put on some bravado. “Y – you have no business interfering in our affairs, you – you empty-headed American *hack*!”

“Yes, I believe we should take him in as well,” said Kingsley gravely. “He’s always been close to the Senior Undersecretary, even before he became his son-in-law.”

Cuffe seethed, his murky blue eyes rippling with hatred upon Kingsley. “Imprisoning *journalists* now, Shacklebolt? You pro-Guilder, anti-Ministry shills will sink to *any* low, won’t you – ?”

“Again with the ‘*journalist*’ thing,” Tokala snorted dryly.

“You keep using that word,” said Mia with a cool smirk. “I do not think it means what you think it means.”

Cuffe continued to complain and swear even as two Aurors snatched him up by the arms, leading him away up the hall.

Cho turned to Percy. The Junior Undersecretary had watched the proceedings with a soft, almost exhausted expression, his eyes touched with relief behind his glasses.

“That was really good of you to do that,” said Cho kindly.

Percy looked at Cho in surprise. Then he offered her a weak smile.

“It was rather good of you to protect me,” he replied. “Thank you.”

Cho smiled. “Don’t be silly. It’s not like I could’ve *not* protected Ron’s brother.”

The mention of Ron made Percy's smile flicker and die, but Cho had no time to notice, for Marietta had swept forward and brought both of her arms around her best friend.

"Cho, I can't believe it!" she said, her eyes flooding with happy tears. "I can't believe you're really *here*! After all these months, barely hearing anything –"

Cho squeezed her back in return. "It's so good to see you too, Marietta..."

Kingsley swept back over to the others, and everyone turned to face him.

"Montmercy, Dolohov, and the other Death Eaters could be back any minute," he said. "We must fortify the Ministry and prevent them from re-entering at all costs and, if possible, rescue Minister Thicknesse. He is no doubt under the Imperius Curse, and we don't want any harm to come to him. Marietta, take four others with you and take Yaxley into custody – charges: aiding and abetting Death Eater activity and treason against the British Wizarding World. I anticipate he won't go quietly, so prepare yourselves. Take Europa Bulstrode and Antony Greengrass into custody as well: we'll need to question them about their involvement in Umbridge's and Montmercy's activities. Percy, dismantle those security lines and get every employee either to their offices or back home – they'll be paid for the hours they're owed, but we'll need to make sure everyone remaining here is properly protected. I need to make contact with Hogwarts – as long as Severus Snape and the Carrows hold sway over that place, the students there will be in danger..."

Far from London, off the coast of Kent, a little blue boat emerged from the ocean water, washing up on the shore outside the town of Whitcastle. Within minutes, about sixty people had disembarked, running out onto the sand and relishing the feeling of freedom that came with the sea foam tickling their toes and the breeze blowing through their hair.

Elijah Whitby stayed inside the boat, helping Jengu wrap his own chest tightly with bandages. Enrouge's curse had nearly caved in his fellow Guilder's chest, but fortunately Jengu was good enough of a Healer that he'd been able to scrounge together the proper potions and spells needed to reduce the pain and heal the worst of the damage.

"I'll never attract another guy or girl again with this look," said Jengu with a pleasant, offhand smile, "but...well, at least I'm still breathing."

Elijah didn't smile, however, as he glanced from Jengu to the stunned Enrouge that George

Ketteridge had bound to the bed close by. Jengu noticed Elijah's gaze and his smile faded.

"You think I was wrong to save him," he accused Elijah quietly.

Elijah looked up at Jengu solemnly. "No. I don't think he *deserved* it...but that doesn't mean I think you were wrong."

Jengu's hawk-like eyes lingered on Enrouge's face.

"...He's all I have left," the Healer said softly. "The Guilders – we weren't just a group, we were... like a family. We supported each other. We had each other's backs. And Adrian...Adrian was our leader. He had all the best ideas – he always seemed to know what to do. If we ever doubted our cause...he always knew just what to say..."

His voice trailed off hopelessly. His sharp-lidded eyes welled up with tears, but he didn't even seem to notice, not even when those tears streaked silently down his cheeks.

Elijah looked upon Jengu with pity; then, after a moment, he extended an arm and wrapped it around the younger man's shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Jacques," he murmured.

The two sat together in silence for a long moment. At last the silence was interrupted when Juliet Puddifoot ran back into the boat to find them.

"Elijah, Jacques, come look!" she said excitedly.

Surprised, Elijah brought an arm under Jengu's so as to help him to his feet, and the two climbed out of the boat and onto the beach.

The Muggles and rescued witches and wizards were all gathered around two people who had joined them at the shore. George Ketteridge was hugging both of them, happy tears streaming down his blond-bearded face.

“She’s *alive* – Rose is *alive* – !” he cried, his voice strained with relief and delight. “Oh, how can I *thank* you – how can I ever – ?”

“Don’t be daft,” said a brusque, but kind male voice. “There’s no way I would’ve left Rose out in the cold. I just wish I could’ve gotten to you all sooner.”

George pulled away from the two people: a very pretty dark-haired woman with a swollen pregnant belly under a sapphire blue dress and a blond-haired, square-jawed man dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans.

At the sight of Elijah, the blond-haired man’s face lit up.

“Mr. Whitby?” he asked.

Elijah blinked. “...You know me?”

“Not directly,” said the man, “but yes. I’m Gordon Ramsay – I taught your son Kevin – ”

Elijah’s heart seemed to leap right out of his chest.

“*Professor Ramsay!*” he said in delight.

He released Jengu and swept forward, seizing Ramsay by both shoulders.

“I’ve heard so much about you – Kevin spoke so kindly of you, in his letters...”

Tana Ramsay came forward to give Elijah a hug too.

“I’m so glad we found you! We were so worried, after Kevin arrived at the Creeveys’ ...”

Elijah's green eyes widened. "The Creeveys' – you mean – ?"

"Kevin's safe," Ramsay said reassuringly. "He was injured, but Tana was able to give him a new arm and Colin and Dennis have been taking good care of him."

Elijah had to cover his face with his hands to obscure his flood of delighted tears. Behind Elijah, Jengu also closed his eyes, exhaling in relief.

Tana squeezed Elijah's arm reassuringly. "Come on, we'd better get you all somewhere under cover. I doubt any Ministry wizards will be out this far...but I think you'll all need some food and medicine."

At the Bulgarians' safe house, the ex-prisoners of the Saeva Ward were all lined up in makeshift cots in each of the four small rooms. Georgi had prepared several Healing Potions for them, and Viktor and Iskra had taken it upon themselves to administer the potions and make their patients as comfortable as they could.

Antoinette Montmercy had not left her son's side for a second since he'd come through the grate. They'd held each other for almost an hour, crying and talking and sharing in each other's pain and fear. Then Antoinette gave Julien a Sleeping Potion and coaxed him off to sleep, sitting at the foot of his bed in a steadfast vigil.

The man called Lavrov brought a vial of sunny-yellow potion over to Bridget, who was lying on the bed closest to the window in the study, just to the left of Donaghan Tremlett's. Lavrov's shoulder was bandaged very tightly and his left arm was in a constricting sling so as to prevent it from moving.

"Here," he said, "this should help with some of the pain."

Bridget took it gratefully and sipped it down. It tasted like hot tea with honey, yet the heat running through her also seemed to numb the flaring pain in her legs and nerves.

"Better?" asked Lavrov.

“Much,” said Bridget.

She paused. Then she spoke again.

“...I never got to thank you, for saving my life.”

The skull-eyed man gave Bridget a very small smile.

“I couldn’t have done anything else,” he said. “I know your loss would have devastated my sweet Laurel...she’s spoken so kindly of you in her letters, it almost makes me feel as though we are already friends.”

Bridget frowned in confusion. “*Laurel?*”

Then she straightened up in realization, her black eyes widening.

“Wait...do you mean Daphne? You know Daphne?”

“Yes,” said the skull-eyed man. “My name is Rudolf Kransimir – I doubt my Laurel has told you of me, but – ”

“*The scrapbooks!*” Bridget’s face broke out into a huge grin, suddenly over-bright. “You made our scrapbooks!”

Rudolf chuckled. “Yes. Originally the scrapbooks had been something I had created for my Laurel and me, so that we could keep in touch without either of our parents catching on. My parents, they had it in their heads to marry me off to a friend’s daughter, and Laurel’s parents...well, they are very *overprotective*. But then last year, when she made friends with all of you...oh, did she *blossom*! Her letters were so much happier, when she spoke of you, Ron, Colin, and the rest. You even helped bring my Laurel and her sister back together! When she asked me if there was any way I could make a scrapbook for all of you, I knew I simply had to.”

Bridget was touched by the emotion in Rudolf’s voice. There was a romantic, practically lovesick quality to it, and to think it was in response to sophisticated, refined Daphne was both amusing and

kind of sweet.

“But...why didn’t Daphne ever tell us about you?” asked Bridget. “I never even knew she *had* a boyfriend.”

Rudolf smiled sadly.

“Laurel has always been, how would you say...a bit *selfish* in regards to me. I think she loves that I have been her little secret all these years, and it may be difficult for her to ‘*share*’ me. I’m not criticizing my love, of course,” he said quickly when Bridget frowned disapprovingly, “I’m not perfect either. I have had to lie to Daphne about what I’ve been doing, after all. She still believes me to be safely hiding in Bulgaria, for I could not threaten her safety by telling her of my true location. But I couldn’t stay put, not when my sweet Laurel was assigned to marry that *beast* Amycus Carrow – ”

He spat the name through bared teeth. Bridget’s mouth dropped open.

“*What?!*”

Rudolf’s sunken-in blue eyes flared with hatred. “New policy at the British Ministry of Magic – all Purebloods of legal age will be assigned arranged marriages, so as to promote the birth of more Pureblood children. I was not entirely sure what I might have to do – whether I could rearrange things so Daphne and I could elope, or arrange for Amycus Carrow to meet a sorry end – maybe even sabotage the Death Eaters within the Ministry – but I knew if I wished to get close enough to make a difference, I had to lie in wait. So I played up my knowledge of the Dark Arts – we all learn both Defense and the Dark Arts at Durmstrang – and acted dumb and docile...and eventually, I got clearance to the Yard.”

Bridget’s eyes softened. “So you did all this, put yourself at so much risk...all for Daphne.”

Rudolf smiled wryly. “Well, admittedly, it was also the right thing to do...but yes.”

Bridget gave him a broad white grin.

“There’s something I don’t get, though,” she said slowly. “Why do all of your friends call you ‘*Lavrov*?’”

Viktor and Georgi had been passing by the doorframe and at Bridget's question they both burst into laughter. Rudolf scowled at both of them.

"It is a joke," Viktor explained to Bridget amusedly. "One day I stumbled upon one of Rudolf's letters to his *skŭpa* and asked him about it when Georgi and Iskra were around. He only ever calls Miss Greengrass '*Laurel*' or '*my sweet Laurel*' – so we started calling him that whenever we saw him. '*Lavrov*' in Bulgarian means '*laurel*.'"

"At least it's better than what you called *your* lady," Rudolf snapped at Viktor defensively. "What was it, '*Hermey-own*'?"

Bridget burst out laughing.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Mia is a Nouveau-Maj (Muggle-born) witch whose favorite movie is *The Princess Bride*. ;D

Lightning Strikes

May 1, 1998

Everyone,

*Oh, Merlin, so much has happened; I hardly know where to start. I only hope that you all will get this before morning – **the Ministry has revolted!***

The rumors you all heard at school are true! There were three break-ins today – one at Gringotts, one at Azkaban, and one at the Saeva Ward. We don't have all the details yet, but Jacques Jengu was behind the one at Azkaban, Viktor Krum and one of the new Bulgarian Aurors were sighted freeing patients from the Saeva Ward, and yes, it's true, Ron, Hermione, and Harry were sighted escaping on the back of a dragon after the break-in at Gringotts!

But yes, so Thicknesse, Dolohov, and Montmercry were forced to leave the Ministry to deal with the three break-ins. Umbridge was left in charge, and well, long story short, Ron's brother Percy and Kingsley Shacklebolt were able to expose the truth, and both Umbridge and Uric Cuffe were arrested. Marietta tried to arrest Yaxley too, but he escaped. She also looked for your father, Daphne, and your mother, Millicent, but when she went to their offices, they were gone. I told her and Shacklebolt that they're not with the Death Eaters, as they're in that faction secretly working against You-Know-Who, but Shacklebolt still looked worried. He seems to think they might have felt like they had to go with Yaxley, since they want to stay at an advantageous position with You-Know-Who and his followers. I know that's not a nice thought, Daphne and Millicent, but I'm sure your parents will be okay. Even if they have to work with the Death Eaters, we at least know they're on our side, right? And there are others working with them who should protect them, right?

Anyway, Dolohov, Montmercry, and Thicknesse tried to return to the Ministry this evening with the witches and wizards they brought with them, only to be faced by Kingsley Shacklebolt; my teammates from America, Lance and Mia; Percy; and about twenty-five others, who tried to put Dolohov and Montmercry under arrest. Needless to say, Montmercry and Dolohov didn't surrender quietly, and as I'm writing now, they and their Death Eater buddies have been barraging us from the outside for the last few hours, fighting to get back inside and regain control of the Ministry. Shacklebolt assigned seven of us to maintain the shields surrounding the Atrium while everyone else fights their forces above ground. (Most of the Ministry's employees went home as soon as Umbridge was arrested, so at least the only people we're protecting right now are ourselves.) It's very scary here, but we all know how much scarier it would be if we let the Ministry of Magic fall again.

*For those of you at Hogwarts, Shacklebolt told me to pass on this message: **fight or fly**. As soon as Snape and the Carrows get wind of what's going on, they'll likely try to use Hogwarts and its students as collateral. Right now the Death Eaters seem confident that they'll be able to take back the Ministry, even if they've been locked out of it (Mia says that bigots tend to have a narcissistic view of themselves, which makes it harder for them to gage their own abilities and how they measure up to others'), but if things here go south, we all know the Death Eaters will use whatever dirty trick they have to to get their way.*

I pray that you all will read this in time: please, I beg you – please be safe!

Love,

Cho

Cho put down her lavender-colored scrapbook and looked up at the greenish white shields overhead. Over the last three hours, the seven witches and wizards holding the perimeter had rotated, giving each other breaks every-so-often, and when Cho finally got her turn, she'd written down every detail she could to her friends.

Somewhere inside the Ministry a clock loudly chimed the hour: **10:00 PM.**

Marietta came over to Cho's side. She glanced grimly up at the Magic is Might statue that had replaced the old fountain at the center of the Atrium: then she settled herself on the short wall surrounding it and took her best friend's hand. The marble wizard sitting on a throne made of tiny, dirty Muggle-borns cast a long, opaque shadow across the floor that almost obscured the two women from view.

"It might be past curfew, but it's not that late, really," Marietta said quietly. "They might still be awake."

Cho bowed her head. "I hope so."

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was almost deathly still. Exams were right around the corner, so all of the remaining students – particularly those about to take their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s – had been even quieter and more subdued than ever. After all, when the Headmaster and two professors determining your academic future were Death Eaters, one didn't want to get in too much trouble.

Daphne Greengrass sat in one of the black leather armchairs in front of the Slytherin fireplace. In her lap was a worn brown leather scrapbook decorated with a tiny silver lock: this one wasn't nearly as neat as the one she shared with her cooking friends, but that was to be expected, as it was the original model of the Kransimir scrapbook that she still shared with Rudolf.

My dear Rudolf,

I haven't heard from you in a few days now, and I confess, your lack of a response worries me. Even when we have so little to say, your words are always an endless source of comfort, and I beg you not to grow distant. The end of the school year is so near, and for the first time in my life, I find myself dreading it. For so long, my graduation has represented freedom, but with Amycus's shadow looming over me, that freedom has been thrown into question, and the thought sickens me.

Everyone is well. Cho said she was visiting the Ministry of Magic today as part of an American envoy from their Department of Magical Games and Sports, so I anticipate she'll write us a letter about it tomorrow. Astoria has been very busy preparing for her O.W.L. exams, so we haven't conversed as often as usual: I anticipate she'll be aiming for straight O's. Pansy and I have been studying for our N.E.W.T.s as well; Pansy once convinced Draco to join us, but Millicent has chosen to study on her own. I'm not surprised: she's never had quite as much interest in maintaining a friendship with Pansy as I have. Hannah also told us through the scrapbooks that earlier today, the Carrows confronted Neville Longbottom in the hallway. Apparently the Ministry, on the Carrows' request, tried taking Longbottom's grandmother into custody two days ago, so as to force Longbottom to get in line. When the Mastiffs came to arrest her, though, she somehow took down all five of them single-handedly and disappeared. Since they couldn't blackmail Longbottom to get their way, Alecko decided that the only choice left was to make an example of him. In the end, Longbottom had to finally cut his losses and go underground with the rest of Dumbledore's Army. Now there's no one left to stand up to Alecko and Amycus.

My Rudolf, when you are able, please enclose a picture of yourself. I need to see your smile – perhaps then I will feel halfway alive. I wish

“What are you doing down here?”

Daphne quickly snapped her scrapbook shut and looked up. Through the darkness she caught sight of a girl her age with a black bob dressed in a pink bathrobe over a set of black silk pajamas.

It was Pansy. She glanced around at the abandoned, darkened common room with faint suspicion.

“I couldn't sleep,” Daphne explained, “so I thought I'd work on my scrapbook.”

Daphne thought her tone had sounded very level and honest, but Pansy raised an eyebrow, not seeming thoroughly convinced. The seventh year Slytherin prefect crossed her arms, her gaze drifting from Daphne's scrapbook to up at her face.

“You could do that up in our dorm,” she said stiffly.

Daphne gave a shrug, feigning nonchalance. “I know...I just thought I’d do it down here.”

“So no one else could see what you’re writing?” challenged Pansy. “So *I* couldn’t read what you’re writing?”

“No,” Daphne lied at once.

“Don’t lie to me,” scoffed Pansy. “Why *else* would you want to be alone, if you didn’t want anyone else to see? Is it that you’re writing something about me behind my back...or is it that you just don’t want to be around me at all?”

“We just finished studying together a couple of hours ago,” said Daphne, putting on the most unperturbed air she could. “What makes you think I don’t want to be around you?”

Pansy’s eyes flared.

“Oh gee, I don’t know,” she said with biting sarcasm, “maybe it’s because you haven’t initiated any conversation with me all year? Maybe it’s because when we were on the Hogwarts Express, you barely said a word? Maybe it’s because these days, whenever it’s a choice between your baby sister and me, you *always* pick her?”

Daphne’s eyes narrowed as she rose from the armchair to her feet. “Astoria needs me.”

“You two barely exchanged a word for four years!” Pansy shot back angrily. “When she ended up in Ravenclaw, you said you’d never speak to her again – I hexed her twice, to pay her back for hurting you!”

“Things are different now.”

“You don’t think I’ve *noticed*?!”

Pansy barreled forward, getting right up in Daphne's face. Her face looked visibly paler and her eyes flashed with anger and pain.

"You don't think I haven't seen how much you've been scuttling around behind my back? You don't think I haven't guessed that you've been keeping more than a few secrets from me? We've been friends since our very first *day* at Hogwarts! And yet, ever since this year began, you've held me at arm's length – hell, *further* than that!"

"I'm sorry that you dislike sharing me with others, Pansy," Daphne said very icily.

"*Sharing?!?*" repeated Pansy heatedly. "*Sharing?!?* What the hell do *you* know about sharing?! You've been purposefully lying to my face – I *know* you have! All I wonder is how long it's been going on! Were you lying to me last year too? The years before that? Were you always crooked and shady and I just didn't notice, or did that just happen all of a sudden?"

Miraculously Daphne didn't rise in response to Pansy's anger. Like her father, she was remarkably cool under pressure.

"We're Slytherins, Pansy," she said, her dark eyes boring into Pansy's pug-like face coldly. "We are *all* shady sorts."

She moved as if to leave, but Pansy seized hold of her arm.

"Daphne, don't do this," said Pansy very lowly. Her voice betrayed a bizarre crack of emotion, despite the mask of righteous anger she'd been wearing. "Don't walk away from me too."

Daphne didn't even turn around. She merely broke out of Pansy's grip and strode off, disappearing up the stairs and leaving Pansy alone in the common room.

The Room of Requirement was as quiet as Hogwarts, but much less tense. The lights were all off, the wireless wizard radio was silent, and the large canvas painting that sometimes held a sweet-looking girl with long blond hair was vacant. Nearly all of the students inside were fast asleep in the four-poster beds the Room had conjured up for them. The two exceptions were sitting on the

rug in front of the large brick fireplace on the far end.

“Sit still,” said Hannah, as she dabbed a cloth soaked in violet Healing Potion against Neville’s cheek. Little by little one of the small cuts there sealed itself up, as if the potion had given him invisible stitches.

Neville smiled shyly at Hannah. There were several large gashes remaining on his round face and his left eye was blackened and swollen shut.

“Thanks for this,” he said softly.

“Don’t be silly,” scolded Hannah. “I mean, I’m no Madame Pomfrey, but there’s no way I was going to just let you go to bed in a mess. ”

Neville’s smile widened in amusement. “No matter how much I said I was fine?”

“No matter how much you said you were fine,” said Hannah stubbornly.

Neville’s eyes glinted with fondness, even as his cheeks flushed a darker shade of red. Hannah couldn’t help but blush happily herself – even though Neville had really proven himself and his courage this year, he was still so unassuming, and she found it very endearing.

“Hannah...” said Neville slowly.

Hannah soaked the cloth she was using in a tub of water to clean it. “Hmm?”

“I know that after this school year ends, we won’t know what’ll happen, but...well...if we have to go into hiding somewhere else – if we have to leave Hogwarts – I was hoping that we, at least...”

He paused. Hannah looked up at him, startled.

“You...want us to stay together?”

Neville looked up at her, his face lighting up delightedly.

“Yes! Yes, that’s – that’s exactly what I hoped! If you’d be okay with it. I just...”

He coaxed her to put down the cloth she’d been holding and took both of her hands in his.

“I want to protect you,” he said fervently. “I want to protect as many people as I can, but...for a while now, I’ve just...really wanted you safe, the most out of everyone.”

He stared into her eyes even despite the visible nerves on his scarlet face. Hannah stared back at him, her brown eyes very wide and her cheeks very pink. Then, at last, her mouth spread into a large smile and she leapt forward, wrapping both of her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly.

“I want to stay with you too,” she murmured.

Neville beamed, squeezing her closer and burying his face in her blond hair. The two had been in each other’s arms for a few minutes when a shuffle behind them caught their attention – the blond girl in the portrait had reappeared, smiling demurely at them and gesturing them toward her.

Neville immediately got to his feet and strolled over.

“What is it?” he asked her.

The girl merely beckoned him forward again, holding out her hand to him. The portrait swung open like a door, revealing a long, narrow passage.

Hannah gripped his shoulder in concern. Neville took hold of her hand, squeezing it gently.

“Do you think it’s someone else who needs help?” asked Hannah. “Like Seamus?”

“Probably,” said Neville. “I’d better go see what’s up.”

He hoisted himself up over the lip at the base of the frame and started off through the passage. The painting swung shut, and the image of Neville appeared in the canvas, following along after the blond girl and shrinking into the background. Hannah watched him go with baited breath until he was out of sight.

‘I better wake up the others,’ she decided.

Within minutes she’d woken all of the other D.A. members hiding in the room – Ernie, Susan, Zacharias Smith, Terry Boot, Michael Corner, Anthony Goldstein, Lavender Brown, Seamus Finnigan, and Ginny Weasley. They all dressed as quickly as they could and then gathered around the canvas, waiting.

“They’re coming back!” said Anthony after a long moment.

In the background of the empty canvas, several very tiny shapes were slowly coming into view, growing larger as they grew closer to the frame.

“There’s someone behind Neville,” said Lavender.

“Not *someone*,” Zacharias corrected her, “it looks like multiple people...”

Neville appeared to be talking to the people behind him, who Hannah was still having trouble making out. At long last, Neville had reached the front of the portrait and his head and shoulders dominated the canvas for a split second before the frame swung open like a door once more and Neville climbed up and over, grinning from ear to ear as he led the three people behind him into the room.

“Look who it is!” he cried. “Didn’t I tell you?”

Hannah gasped in delight.

“*Ron!*”

She dashed forward, even as the others burst into delighted cries.

“HARRY!”

“It’s Potter, it’s POTTER!”

“Ron!”

“*Hermione!*”

Ron stretched out his long arms and met Hannah halfway, giving her a huge hug.

“Hannah!” he said, his freckled face overtaken by a huge grin. “It’s been forever!”

Hannah beamed over his shoulder. “Oh, Ron, it’s *so* good to see you!”

Terry Boot took the opportunity to go over to the magical radio set up in the corner, turning it on. Withdrawing his wand from his robes, he then tapped the radio three times before placing his wand beside his lips.

“Hogwarts to Potterwatch,” he said sharply, “come in, Potterwatch! Lightning has struck! I repeat – *lightning has struck!*”

Back in London, Kingsley, Tokala, Percy, Mia, and the others were still in the midst of combat. Percy was standing toe-to-toe against the Imperiused Thicknesse, while Tokala and Kingsley fought side by side against Bellatrix Lestrange. Bellatrix had successfully lobbed a Cruciatus Curse at Tokala’s back, but Tokala was able to back-flip out of the way before Bellatrix’s Killing Curse could land.

“Fancy moves, pretty boy,” Bellatrix sneered at the still-disguised Tokala. “Let’s see you dodge

this!”

She lashed her wand at her lips, and then breathed fiercely at the air, setting loose a wide flare of dragon-like fire. In a split second, Tokala reduced his own height, shrinking himself with his Metamorphagus abilities so that he was small enough to avoid the flames.

Kingsley and Bellatrix were visibly taken aback, and Tokala took the opportunity to attack, slashing at the air.

“Diffindo!”

The spell just barely avoided Bellatrix’s face, cutting off some of her black curls. Bellatrix recovered very quickly, barreling forward and blasting flaming black curses in the direction of Tokala’s head.

“Neat trick,” Kingsley complimented Tokala as he shot wordless Disarming Spells in response. “Care to show me how to do that sometime?”

Tokala smirked. “I’m afraid it’s a trade secret, Mr. Shackbolt.”

The Imperiused Thicknesse had backed Percy into a wall, lashing green Killing Curses indiscriminately. Amazingly, despite the ineffectiveness of Shield Charms against the Unforgivable Curses, Percy had been able to evade all of them through some careful maneuvers and by summoning several objects (including someone’s parked car) to use as a physical shield against the green blasts. It was just as Thicknesse blasted apart the piece of rubble Percy had used as a shield and was prepared to strike that a voice suddenly pierced the air.

“LIGHTNING HAS STRUCK AT HOGWARTS. I REPEAT – *LIGHTNING HAS STRUCK AT HOGWARTS.*”

It was Lee Jordan. His voice was echoed a thousand times over, through every car radio in the vicinity.

Everyone froze where they stood. Percy felt as though his heart had leapt into his throat.

Lightning has struck at Hogwarts. Potterwatch used several code names, most notably for its hosts, but that code name in particular had rarely been used, because the person it referred to had been so rarely sighted since the War began.

The Death Eaters, although they didn't seem to know what the message meant, were taken aback by the sudden disturbance and by the exhilarated triumph in Lee Jordan's voice. And sure enough, as Percy, Kingsley and the other British wizards resumed their attack, that same triumph seemed to course through their veins, infusing them with new strength.

Percy lashed out his arm, his wand pointing at the ground under Thicknesse's feet.

"Aperta Vorego!"

All of a sudden, the Imperiused Minister for Magic had fallen through the ground and into a hole that had formed under him. Percy prepared to seal the hole up enough that he couldn't fight back, but Mia appeared at his side, seizing his arm.

"Wait."

All of the Death Eaters had abruptly halted their attacks. Some, like Etienne Montmercy, had pushed up the sleeve of their robes to look at their forearms. Then, in a wave, they Disappeared one by one, with dozens of loud *CRACKS* filling the air as they vanished.

A flump echoed from the chasm Percy had formed. Percy and Mia looked down into it: Pius Thicknesse had collapsed in an unconscious heap.

"They set him loose," said Mia. *"Mobilicorpus."*

Several silvery white strands appeared from her wand and wound their way around the unconscious British Minister, lifting him up and out of the hole. Kingsley lowered his wand. Rather than looking triumphant, however, he looked determined.

"The Dark Lord called his followers back," said Kingsley. *"That can only mean one thing – he knows Harry Potter is at Hogwarts."*

Tokala and Mia straightened up visibly.

“Harry Potter?” said Mia. “How would he have known that?”

“Do you think he figured out the code?” asked Percy.

Kingsley shook his head. “No...I suspect Voldemort has his own way of knowing these things.” He ignored the flinches of the witches and wizards around him. “And he’s made his choice – he thinks that defeating Harry is more important than holding onto the Ministry of Magic.”

Tokala frowned. “Awfully backward logic. Wouldn’t having control over a magical government give you a leg up in capturing your enemies?”

“It might be the narcissism at play again,” said Mia. “It’s likely Voldemort – ” the other British witches and wizards flinched, “ – sorry – thinks that he can take back the Ministry of Magic easily, once he gets Potter out of the way. There are rumors that Potter was Chosen to defeat him, correct?”

“Prophecies are flawed at best,” Tokala reminded her.

“Yes, but not to Vol – that guy. Even if he might not believe that Potter could defeat him, he knows other people find comfort in thinking Potter could do it.”

“So he aims to crush the resistance against him by killing Potter,” surmised Tokala.

At that moment, the seven witches and wizards who had remained in the Atrium, including Cho and Marietta, emerged from the red phone booths close by and ran to meet the others.

“Mia, To – Lance,” Cho caught herself, “did you hear Lee Jordan, in the Atrium?”

“We heard him,” said Mia. “His voice probably came out of every radio for miles.”

Kingsley set his jaw in determination as he turned toward the horizon, his eyes narrowing.

“We’ll need to get to Hogwarts at once. Percy, can I leave you in charge?”

Percy hesitated for a moment. He seemed to be thinking hard. Then at last, he closed his eyes, set his jaw, and then opened them again, his blue eyes blazing behind his glasses.

“...No,” he said. “If Harry is at Hogwarts, that’s where the final battle will be. I’m going with you.”

Kingsley nodded solemnly. “I understand.”

Percy turned to Marietta.

“Marietta...would you take charge?”

Marietta smiled at Percy, reaching out and grabbing hold of his shoulder. “Of course.”

“I’m going too,” Cho told Kingsley fiercely. “Astoria, Daphne, Millicent, and Hannah are over there – Dumbledore’s Army too.”

Tokala placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t forget, Cho,” he murmured, “you’re part of an American envoy. You have British ancestry, but you’re an agent of the MACUSA, and should be representing their interests.”

Cho turned, her black eyes full of upset and her mouth already open and ready to plead her case, but she stilled at the sight of Tokala’s smirk.

“I can’t let you go,” he said almost robotically. He clearly didn’t mean a word of it.

Cho’s face softened visibly and her black eyes sparkled with relief and amusement.

“I don’t need your permission,” she said very coolly.

Cho slid her shoulder out of his grip and strode over to Kingsley and Percy’s side.

“Stop, wait, come back,” Mia said sarcastically, her mouth spread up in a huge grin as she gave Cho a thumb’s up.

Cho grinned broadly at her, Tokala, and Marietta, and in an instant, she, Kingsley, and Percy Disapparated with a *CRACK*.

At Hogwarts, Draco Malfoy woke up in a cold sweat. His arm was on fire. He shoved up the sleeve of his pajamas and his heart prickled in terror when he saw the Dark Mark shining pitch black on his arm, pulsing with terrible pain.

It was Alecto, Draco somehow knew. Alecto had pressed her Mark – and the only reason she would ever have called the Dark Lord was to tell him –

Draco barely took any time at all before acting. Yanking on his robes and shoes, he bolted from his dorm without a word. He would’ve made it out of the dungeons unseen were it not for Pansy, who was still sitting in the common room after her row with Daphne.

“Draco?”

Draco halted mid-step at the sound of her voice. He turned in time to see Pansy climb out of the armchair and rush up to him.

“Where are you going?” she asked him.

Draco avoided her eyes. “Upstairs. Alecto pressed her Dark Mark.”

Pansy's face contorted in confusion and concern.

"Amycus will be able to help her," she said tensely. "You don't –"

"If she pressed her Mark, that means the Dark Lord is on his way," Draco said darkly. "I have to go."

He started to walk off, but Pansy abruptly ran after him and seized hold of his arm.

"Draco, don't!" she said. "Snape and the Carrows are up there – they can handle it –"

'I'm sure they could,' Draco thought sardonically. 'Potter couldn't take down all three of them... unless he got saved by his stupid luck again.'

"I have to go up there and help," he said instead. *Who* he was helping exactly he didn't know. Potter? Snape and the Carrows? Himself?

"They'll be more than enough to handle it!" Pansy insisted. Her voice rang with such concern that it startled Draco. "Just – just stay here! If the Dark Lord is coming – Draco, just *stay here!*"

Draco goggled at her, not understanding at all where this was coming from. Regardless of her rationale, he knew there was no time to wait around. He forced himself to turn away again, trying to pull out of her grip.

"I can't."

But Pansy clung on for dear life.

"I know you don't want to fight!" she said fiercely, though her voice quavered with a bizarre desperation. "I know you don't want to kill! And I know your family lost the Dark Lord's favor! If you go out there, you'll – Draco, if you go out there, you'll *die!*"

Draco whirled on her, his gray eyes very wide. Pansy's narrowed brown eyes were filling with tears

as she seized his shirt with both hands, grabbing onto him.

“You’re all I have left!” she cried, her voice shaking now. “Tracey and Blaise are gone – Millicent and Daphne want nothing to do with me – and you’re *my intended*, Draco! You’re mine, and I need to make sure you’re safe! If you go, I’ll – I’ll be *alone*, Draco! Just stay – stay here, with me, where it’s safe!”

Pansy’s pug-like face was full of such genuine emotion, and yet there was also so much fear and desperation – it was an expression he’d never seen on her face and it made her look so much younger, so much more *fragile* than she’d ever looked before. It terrified Draco to see Pansy this way. Not only was it so bizarre; not only was her desperate attempt to protect him not helping; not only was she clearly locked in this romantic fantasy that they’d never really been in...but also after the way he’d treated her all these years, she had no good reason to feel that kind of fear and caring for his sake.

Not knowing how to express all of the conflicting emotions inside of himself, Draco roughly broke out of Pansy’s arms and bolted from the room.

“Draco! Draco, don’t go! *DRACO!*”

But Draco merely shut Pansy’s cries out and ran faster still.

Colin, Dennis, and Kevin had been awoken out of a sound sleep by Lee Jordan’s announcement blaring out of the two red radios set up in their rooms. Mr. Creevey had run to their rooms, visibly alarmed, but after an hour or so, Kevin was able to soothe the older man’s worries and persuade everyone in the house to go back to bed.

Not that Colin, Dennis, and Kevin *did* go back to bed.

Colin immediately pulled on his bright blue sports jacket and prepared to head out, and when he reached the door, he found Dennis and Kevin waiting for him. They were also fully dressed: Dennis wore a bucket hat, jeans, and a white sweatshirt, while Kevin was in his favorite teal T-shirt and some khaki slacks.

“Did you really think we’d let you head out alone?” asked Dennis amusedly.

Colin glanced from Dennis to Kevin. “I won’t be able to Disapparate with both of you.”

Kevin fixed Colin with an oddly reproachful look, his long lashed eyes narrowed. “We’re not Disapparating at all.”

He opened the door and strolled out into the night air. Dennis and Colin hurried after him.

“We’ll have to Disapparate, if we’re going to get to Hogwarts,” argued Colin. “We won’t be able to Apparate directly, probably, but I can visualize Hogsmeade – ”

“I told you, we’re not Disapparating,” said Kevin, as he withdrew his wand from the inside of his pant pocket. “I’m in no mood to Splinch a second time.”

“Then how are we going to get there?” Colin asked impatiently.

Kevin smiled broadly and, shooting a significant look over his shoulder at Colin, stuck out his fake cherry-wood arm toward the open street.

BANG.

In an instant, a purple triple-decker bus appeared. It squeezed between every car on the block, winding and twisting around the corner, before it skidded to a halt in front of the three boys.

A young dark-skinned woman with her brown hair tied up in a high bun under a cap and a black and white suit with suspenders stepped out. At the sight of the three boys, her eyes lit up, and she crossed her arms confidently.

“Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard,” she recited from memory, “I’m Alicia Spinnet, and I’ll be your conductor this evening – now what in Merlin’s beard are *you* three doing?”

Colin and Dennis’s faces lit up at the sight of the ex-Gryffindor Chaser.

“I didn’t know you were working for the Knight Bus!” said Dennis excitedly.

“I suppose you couldn’t have, given you were in hiding,” said Alicia with a slight shrug. “I’ve had to keep my head down too, though from what I’m hearing, we might not have to much longer.”

“That’s what we heard,” said Colin. “We need to get to Hogwarts, immediately.”

Alicia frowned. “Do you happen to have a Ministry ID card? You need one of those to travel, you know.”

The three boys faltered.

“I’d kind of imagined Confunding the conductor, honestly,” admitted Kevin, holding up the wand in his wooden hand.

“While you still have the Trace on you?” said Alicia. “That’s ballsy.”

“I figured the people at the Ministry might have a few more things on their plate than chasing after us, if Harry Potter has been spotted,” said Kevin sheepishly.

“They do,” assented Alicia. She smiled wryly at the three of them. “Come on, then – we don’t have any time to lose.”

The boys’ faces burst into grins, and they immediately climbed on board.

“Take it away, Ernie!” Alicia told the driver cheerfully.

And with another *BANG*, the Knight Bus was off again.

The residents of Beau Plumpton's house had been fast asleep when a loud knocking at the door roused them. The knocking continued for almost a minute until Beau finally made it downstairs and opened the door.

Rose and Trudy had been hesitant to go upstairs, not knowing who was at the door, but as the minutes dragged on, Rose finally was persuaded enough to inch open the trapdoor so they could listen.

“ – tell us at all, if he didn't want us to help?!” Noel's voice rang out in the din.

“Chef Ramsay wanted to let us know where he was going and why,” said Beau's voice. It seemed like he was desperately trying to keep the peace, but sounded almost frustrated.

“Well, we should be able to go too!” Noel burst out angrily.

“And do *what*, hmm?” came Lucius's cold drawl. “You're just a Muggle-born bantling, barely old enough to produce a proper Shield Charm – ”

“Oh, shut it! We all know *you* don't want to fight, so butt out!”

Rose pushed the trapdoor open and shoved herself up and out.

“What's going on?” she said as she ran into the kitchen.

Noel, Beau, and Lucius all turned to face her, halting their argument. Noel had gotten right up in Lucius's face (which was only possible because Lucius had been sitting down and Noel had been standing), but at Rose's arrival, the Ravenclaw Chaser rushed to meet her.

“Ramsay and Tana came by – they said that Harry Potter has been sighted at Hogwarts.”

Rose's eyes widened. “*What?* Really?”

Trudy entered the room at that moment, looking similarly interested as she came up behind Rose,

resting her hands on the little Hufflepuff's shoulders.

"Ramsay said that if Potter's there, then You-Know-Who won't be far behind him," said Noel. "The Ministry has been trying everything to try and catch Potter, and now that everyone knows where he is, there's likely to be a fight at the school."

Trudy looked alarmed. "All those children – someone's got to go and help them!"

"That's what *I* said," Noel said fiercely.

"Ramsay asked us all to stay here," Beau said ruefully.

Trudy's face hardened. "Well, *I'm* not going to."

She whipped out her wand and turned to Lucius.

"Lucius...I need you to take me to Hogsmeade."

Lucius looked revolted. "*What?*"

"You can Apparate," Trudy said stridently. "Or if you'd prefer broom travel, we'll fly. But I'm in no shape to fly that far on my own."

"If you're in no shape to fly on your own, you shouldn't – " Beau started, but Lucius interrupted him.

"Have you forgotten? I used to *serve* the Dark Lord. He now thinks me *dead* – if he or anyone else were to see me alive, then both my and my family's lives would be forfeit!"

Trudy's eyes flashed angrily. "Lucius, you can leave as soon as you Apparate me there – I'm not asking you to stay – "

Lucius's lip curled angrily as he turned away.

"I am not going anywhere *near* that school," he said coldly.

Shooting a glare at Lucius, Noel turned to Trudy urgently. "Then I'll take you."

Trudy, Beau, and Lucius all opened their mouths as if to argue, but Noel shut them down.

"If you want to get to Hogwarts, Trudy, you'll need someone to fly with you. Professor Flitwick once told me that he's seen professional Quidditch players fly only *half* as well as me – I can get you there."

"You're too young," Trudy said stubbornly.

"Yes," granted Noel just as stubbornly. "But I'm the only one willing and able to do it. It's your call."

Trudy looked very conflicted. She looked as though she was considering giving up altogether. Then, finally, she said very softly,

"You're flying me there...but you are *not* fighting."

Beau gaped at Trudy. Noel clenched their jaw and nodded, running to the room behind the bookcase to pull on some clothes and fetch their broomstick. Trudy raised her wand and wordlessly summoned a set of long coral-colored robes, which she put on over her pajamas, and a pair of lace-up boots.

"Trudy," Beau stammered, "you – you can't be serious – "

"I've never been more serious in my life," said Trudy as she sat down in one of the chairs at the dining table and put on her boots.

"You're too old to fight in a War!" Beau said desperately.

“That may be,” the older woman agreed, “but this might be our best chance to pay You-Know-Who back, for all the mess he’s made. And I’ve had quite enough of children dying because the adults are too pig-headed to see the danger they’ve placed them in.”

Noel strode back into the dining room, broom in hand and dressed in a rather pretty set of violet dress robes decorated with gold moons and stars and their pointed brown hat.

“I’m coming too!” said Rose at once.

“No,” said Trudy, and to everyone’s surprise, so did Noel.

Noel faced Rose, their hazel eyes flickering solemnly.

“I can’t carry two people on my broom. And even if I could take you too...well...”

They trailed a hand through Rose’s brown hair, their pink lips touched by a sad smile.

“...I wouldn’t want to.”

Rose looked very upset. “Noel – ”

In an instant Noel had shot forward, leaning in to place a chaste kiss to the side of Rose’s face. The kiss lingered against her skin in tingling tremors.

“I promise I’ll come back,” said Noel, their eyes shining with resolve. “I promise.”

Rose was left stunned as Noel turned and headed for the door, Trudy beside them. At long last, after several minutes, Rose recovered herself, and she bolted after them, hurtling the door open and running out onto the front stoop.

“No, wait – please – !”

But it was too late. Noel kicked off from the ground and they and Trudy soared up into the air and out of sight.

Just before 11 o'clock the night of May 1st, Severus Snape crashed through a window and flew away as a dark bat-like shadow, throwing itself against the horizon and out of sight. Not long later, the remaining professors and several Order of the Phoenix reinforcements set to work creating shields around the school.

The students were all summoned to the Great Hall. Professor McGonagall stood at her old place at the head of the teachers' table, her face very white as she announced the evacuation of the school. In the middle of her announcement, however, she was interrupted by a terrible, cold, high-pitched voice that echoed through the halls of the school so quietly and yet so penetratingly that it sounded like some ancient monster trapped inside the walls.

"I know that you are preparing to fight. Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood."

"Give me Harry Potter, and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you will be rewarded."

"You have until midnight."

The entire school it seemed had been enveloped in a suffocating, squeezing silence. Every head turned toward Harry sitting at the Gryffindor table with Ginny. He was definitely uncomfortable by the level of scrutiny, but he did not crumple, his green eyes instead looking rather grim.

Then, out of nowhere, Pansy shot to her feet.

"Well, he's right there! Someone grab him!"

Before Harry could move or even speak, there was a massive shift. Every Gryffindor, to a man, rose to their feet and immediately created a human wall around Harry. Not long later, the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws stood as well, flanking the Gryffindors on either side. The Slytherins sat stock-still at their table, staring up at Pansy – even if they weren't standing, they were clearly revolted. Daphne hugged her brown and pearl white scrapbooks tightly against her chest.

“Thank you, Miss Parkinson,” McGonagall said, her tone very clipped and cold. “You will leave the Hall first with Mr. Filch. The rest of your house may follow.”

The benches scraped against the floor as the Slytherins got to their feet. They started to head out together, but Daphne stopped when she realized that one of their number had not risen from her seat.

Millicent stayed completely still and silent, her eyes locked on the table. Pansy seemed to have noticed too, and she cleared her throat loudly.

“Millicent,” she hissed. “Come on.”

Millicent did not answer.

“Come on,” repeated Pansy. “It’s time to go.”

Millicent raised her head, her small brown eyes narrowing upon Pansy’s face. Then, after a moment, she finally spoke.

“It’s time for *you* to go.”

Pansy and Daphne gawked. The other Slytherins turned back around to watch the exchange.

“What?” said Pansy.

“I’m staying,” Millicent said stoutly.

Everyone else in the Great Hall gawked too. Even McGonagall looked taken aback.

Pansy stared at Millicent, clearly stunned.

“Millicent, the Dark Lord is coming! You really want to throw your life away? And for *what*? To help *Potter*?”

Millicent didn't answer, instead crossing her arms and turning away.

Daphne brought a hand down onto Millicent's shoulder.

“Millicent,” she whispered, “Cho said in the scrapbooks that your mother is with the Death Eaters. My father, too. They might be forced to fight in the battle – like Draco.”

Millicent glanced at Daphne out the corner of her eye.

“We're not like Ron or Hannah, Millicent,” said Daphne urgently. “We're not trained in wizard dueling – we're outmatched – and if we have to fight Draco – our family – ”

Her dark eyes flickered with pain, but her stoic air didn't crack.

“I get wanting to help...but there *has* to be another way.”

Millicent stared at Daphne for a long moment. Despite her stony expression, her gaze betrayed some compassion.

“I'm not asking you to stay,” Millicent told her friend as gently as her hard voice would allow. “But I've made up my mind.”

Daphne hesitated. She glanced back at Astoria at the Ravenclaw table – she would have to evacuate too, as she was underage. The younger Greengrass's light blue eyes looked very conflicted, like she wanted to stay and fight too.

“*Daphne...Astoria,*” Antony Greengrass's words echoed in Daphne's ear, “*I expect you both to stay out of trouble – mind your professors, stay in line – and don't – don't play the hero.*”

Millicent spared Daphne a very small smile. Then she slowly got to her feet and wrapped her large arms around Daphne in a hug.

“It’s okay,” she mumbled. “I’m sure you’ll come up with something – you’ve always been smart.”

Daphne closed her eyes and hugged her friend back. Then the two women split apart, Daphne leaving the Great Hall and Millicent remaining at the Slytherin table.

The other Slytherin seventh years, Pansy, Crabbe, and Goyle, left too – as Tracey and Zabini had already left school, there were no other adult Slytherins who might have chosen to stay. Quite a few Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs, and Gryffindors followed along after the Slytherins, though in the last’s case, it was mostly by force, as many Gryffindor underclassmen tried to stay anyway.

“*Absolutely not, Peakes!*” barked McGonagall. “And take Miss Vanity with you!”

Just before midnight on May the 1st, through the same Potterwatch link that Lee Jordan had used earlier that day, the melodic voice of Evander Goodfellow echoed out from every radio all over Great Britain.

“The time is here . I’m trapped by fear.

I ran a million miles trying to escape this day,

Yet here it be: eternity,

Where are you? Oh, why can’t you keep the end at bay?

“I fight back rage taking this stage:

It’s not fair, it’s not true, that we must go to war!

Still the drums swell like a death's knell –

I’ve fought so hard not to fight, but I can’t anymore.

“I watch the sky: I must not cry,

Not when I feel destiny's pull.

This is your fate; no time to wait;

Don't fight the inevitable.

“Winter comes, roses fade; I'll be but a shade

Of the man I once was, at the end.

I only pray maybe some day

We'll be together again, my friend .

Evil stands tall, threatening us all,

Trampling all of our flowers to dust .

The garden has died: we're trapped inside

Of bodies stained with despair and rust,

But I'll feed new blooms with my blood and my soul:

I'll plant rosy memories inside of my heart,

And although it's true I'm but part of a whole,

You can't tell me I'm not an important part...

And so I'll march on.

I'll march on

Through the night, through the cold and the snow.

So I'll march on.

I'll search for the light; it's still out there, I know,

And so I'll march on.

And so I'll march on.

I'll march on

'Til day breaks, through the wind and the rain.

So I'll march on,

Whatever it takes, no matter the pain,

And so I'll march on.

And so I'll march on.

I'll march on,

On and on, through the hurt and the fear.

So I'll march on.

Hold tight now, my dear: the dawn's almost here,

And so I'll march on..."

Although the young songwriter and his husband had not been seen in months and his voice sounded very strained, Evander's song rang with a resilience and strength that touched all who heard it.

Finally, at the stroke of midnight, the Battle of Hogwarts began.

The Battle of Hogwarts

Professor McGonagall assembled all of the combatants at the front gate surrounding Hogwarts so that they stood in lines before the two large pillars decked by winged boars. Madame Hooch and Professors Flitwick, Sinistra, Vector, Trelawney, and Sprout had already conjured up large white magical shields around the school. The only teacher not present, Professor Slughorn, was assigned to watch over the students who had evacuated and were now secretly awaiting transport home at the Hog's Head.

McGonagall stood at the front of the troops, her posture flawlessly straight as ever. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Professor Flitwick stood on either side of her as she looked out gravely at the horizon.

Out of the pitch black sky emerged a fog of figures that seemed to crawl out of the air and descend upon the school. There was also a great, rhythmic rumbling in the distance, plodding closer and closer like a thundering, menacing heartbeat.

Zacharias Smith, who was standing just behind McGonagall, gave a soft gasp of horror.

"*Giants*," he realized.

The creatures made Hagrid look petite. They were very wide and very large, and they loomed large over the Forbidden Forest, pushing trees aside as easily as one might move a chair across the dining room. In front of them also swept a horde of about a hundred dementors, which huddled so close together they looked like one large, torn, chilling blanket of endless hooded faces. To their left were the giant, hairy bodies of a hundred Acromantula of various sizes, the largest being almost Aragog's size. On the other side was Fenrir Greyback and about ten other messily dressed wizards and witches with similarly mangy hair and long, filthy nails and teeth.

"Those people," murmured Cho, "are they...?"

"Snatchers," said Kingsley, just as Lupin said, "Werewolves."

Both Kingsley and Cho turned to Lupin, whose tawny-brown eyes fell sadly.

"I tried to recruit as many of them as I could to our side last year," he explained, "but...well, when

the whole world persecutes you for something you can't control...sometimes you'll support just about anyone."

Tonks took her husband's hand and squeezed it without tearing her narrowed almond-shaped eyes away from the Forest.

In front of all of the vicious-looking reinforcements stood the black-robed, masked Death Eaters, and in the center of the sea of masks was a very tall, skeletal figure more terrifying than the rest of the army combined.

He was garbed in black hooded robes, but he looked nothing like the underlings he towered over. His slender face was as white as a skull's, maybe whiter. The fingers on his white hands were long and bony thin, giving off the appearance of spider's legs. He had no nose, rather just slits like a snake's, and he seemed to have no hair anywhere, whether on his pale arms or the top of his veinless white head. Even his mouth, just barely visible under the collar of his hooded robes, had no lips. But scariest of all were his eyes, blood red with cat-like slits for pupils – there was no white in his eyes: no humanity or shred of mercy. They were a monster's eyes, transplanted in human skin.

Even those who had never seen Lord Voldemort before knew him at once upon laying eyes on him.

Voldemort came to a halt about ten feet from the gate surrounding Hogwarts. As soon as he stopped walking, so too did everyone in his ranks. The Dark Lord's scarlet eyes hovered over the school before landing on McGonagall and the combatants standing behind her. Even though Voldemort's heartless gaze prompted most of the people behind her to shrink back, McGonagall didn't flinch.

High above them, the bell in the Hogwarts clock tower tolled the hour. As the twelve low chimes echoed through the air, McGonagall and Voldemort stared each other down, the tension congealing between them.

Once the chimes ceased, there was a ringing silence. Voldemort trailed his long, spider-like fingers along the beautifully carved Elder wand at his side. He turned his head, his scarlet eyes flickering over to his second-in-command, Bellatrix Lestrange, who stood to his left.

"So," he said. His cold, oddly high-pitched voice was the vocal equivalent of someone taking a sharp blade and scraping it down your spine, and it carried with little effort. "They have decided to *decline* my request."

Bellatrix smirked coldly at McGonagall, her dark eyes flashing. The other Death Eaters murmured amongst themselves, some sounding smug and others angry.

Voldemort faced the forces protecting Hogwarts again, his cold expression not shifting. He raised his wand and pointed it at the school beyond.

“I want Potter alive,” he pronounced without straining his voice in the slightest, “and anyone who thinks to protect him from me *ended*. Go!”

The word was all the permission his servants needed. All at once, the Death Eaters and their allies came crashing down upon the school, lashing out at Hogwarts’ makeshift army and the shields they’d conjured. Spells flew in every direction as the giants began to slam their massive limbs against the magical barriers, making the entire ground shake.

Harry ran back toward the seventh floor corridor, Ron and Hermione at his heels. Thanks to the Grey Lady’s advice, he now knew where he could find the Horcrux Voldemort had hidden in the school, but in order to reach that place, he’d need to first get everyone out of the Room of Requirement –

“Harry!”

Harry stilled.

Waiting at the entrance of the Room of Requirement was a tall man with blond hair dressed in a white jacket, black T-shirt, and jeans, his square face stretched with a smile that was a rare sight on such sharp features.

“*Professor Ramsay!*” cried Ron and Hermione together.

The three ran up to him. To their surprise, Ramsay grabbed hold of Harry’s forearms, squeezing them tightly in a quasi-embrace.

“*Thank goodness,*” he breathed in relief as his blue eyes flickered over all three of them. “Thank goodness you’re all right.”

“What – ” Harry said weakly, “ – what are you doing here? I thought you didn’t want to fight...”

Ramsay turned to Harry, his expression sobering.

“I didn’t,” he admitted. “But there’s something I’ve wondered for a while now, and...well, when I heard Lee’s announcement tonight, I knew once and for all that it was true.”

His lips curled up in a small wry smile.

“I told you once, a while back, that I had no intention of fighting Dumbledore’s battles. Even Dumbledore, before he died, knew in his heart that I would never fight for him. But from the moment I met you, Harry...when I saw the man you’ve become, in Lily and James’s footsteps...”

The softness in Ramsay’s blue eyes startled Harry.

“...I realized...that I could fight for *you*.”

Harry stared at Ramsay, stunned.

“But – ” he stammered, “but I don’t *want* you to fight for me – ”

Ramsay smiled broadly. “And that’s exactly why I will. Because fighting *for* you would be fighting *with* you.”

The ex-Potions professor extended a hand to Harry. The Boy Who Lived stared at it for a long moment; then he looked up at Ramsay’s face, his green eyes narrowing solemnly.

“I need everyone out of the Room of Requirement,” he told him. “Will you help me?”

Ramsay smiled wryly as he inclined his head in a muted nod. “I’ll help Tana speed up the evacuation and then lead the rest out into the field. Once I get out there, I can get anyone who’s wounded to safety.”

Harry’s face spread into a grateful smile and he took Ramsay's hand in a firm handshake.

The Knight Bus pulled into Hogsmeade station at about 1 in the morning. As soon as the bus doors opened, Slughorn immediately greeted Alicia Spinnet with a mass of young students gathered behind him.

“Thank goodness!” he said, his rotund, usually jolly voice sounding much more urgent. “These students need to return to London, immediately! They’ll give you their addresses once you’re on your way – I’ll cover the cost of their transport – ”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on – ” said Alicia, but Slughorn ignored her, shooing the younger students all onto the bus in a wave.

Colin, Dennis, and Kevin, seeing how crazy the front of the bus was, decided to jump out the back. They looked up through the dark night at the murky shape of Hogwarts in the distance. Only the multicolored flares of dueling spells illuminated the towers, being the only evidence of life apart from the horrible smashing of giant feet and the shrieking of various beasts.

“How are we going to get up there?” Kevin murmured to the Creevey brothers. “The gate out of the village is shut...”

Dennis’s brown eyes darted around, landing on the pub that still more students were fleeing from in favor of the Knight Bus parked in front.

“The Hog’s Head!” he said excitedly. “It’s too small to hold that many people, so – ”

“So there must be a passage from the pub into the school!” finished Colin. “Come on!”

The elder Creevey barreled into the pub, his younger brother and Kevin right behind him. They

pushed through the crowd of students, forcing their way to the opening over the fireplace normally hidden by a portrait of a young blond girl. The students trying to leave gave the three boys confused looks as they shoved past, fighting the flow of traffic. Just as Colin had hoisted himself up onto the table ready to climb into the passage, however, the three boys were stopped by a familiar voice.

“Wait – stop!”

It was Slughorn. He looked very harried as he rushed over to them.

“Colin my boy, get down from there!” he cried.

Colin didn’t listen: instead he leapt up and over the lip of the frame and set off at a run down the passage. Dennis and Kevin made as if to follow him, but Slughorn reached the portrait first, quickly slamming it shut.

“Stand back!” Slughorn said urgently.

“Professor, we’ve come to *help*!” Kevin cried desperately.

“*Kevin!*”

Kevin whirled around. It was Astoria, and just behind her was Daphne.

Both Astoria and Kevin flung their arms out wide, latching onto each other in a tight hug.

“*Astoria!*” breathed Kevin in relief.

“What are you *doing* here!?” Daphne demanded urgently.

For once, Kevin was too anxious to put on his usual smile. “I couldn’t just let Colin and Dennis go without me – ”

“You’re only *fourteen*, son!” said Slughorn, his voice torn between reproach and empathy.

Undeterred, Dennis continued to kick and shove in an attempt to reach the portrait hole.

“Who *cares*?! *Augh* – we have to go *help* – !”

He whipped out his wand, brandishing it threateningly, but Slughorn disarmed the younger boy with very little effort.

“*Expelliarmus*,” murmured the Potions Master sharply. He fixed both Dennis and Kevin with a firm eye that nonetheless shone with pain. “I understand wanting to fight – really, I do – but barreling in with no plan or back-up won’t help *anyone*!”

“My *brother’s* over there!” Dennis shot back angrily. “*Harry’s* over there, and the D.A.! Let – me – *through* – !”

He tried to shove his way back to the portrait hole: Slughorn held the younger Creevey brother back with one large arm, his eyes filling with tears.

Kevin darted over as well, his cherrywood hand grabbing hold of Slughorn’s arm and pulling at it frantically.

“Professor, we can’t let Colin fight alone! *Please*!”

“We have to go get him!” Astoria pleaded too. “Professor, *please*!”

But Slughorn wouldn’t let any of them through. He hated hearing them scream...but he knew that letting them anywhere close to the battlefield would be sentencing them to death.

Daphne looked up through the Hog’s Head window at the school, her dark eyes running anxiously over the scarlet and green spells blasting through the black. Then she shot forward, diving past Slughorn to reach for the portrait’s frame.

“Wait – !” cried Slughorn.

But when Daphne pulled the portrait away from the wall, all of them shrank back in horror.

The passage entrance was gone.

On Harry’s direction, the Room of Requirement was cleared out of any lingering students. Most of them, like Ginny, barreled out onto the battlefield without a second thought. Then Harry had changed the Room, bidding it to show the “place where everything is hidden.”

That meant, however, that the passage that had connected the D.A.’s hideout with the Hog’s Head was now unreachable.

When the magical shields came crashing down, the Death Eaters advanced onto the grounds. Desperate to keep them away from the school, the students and teachers of Hogwarts used every weapon at their disposal.

Professor McGonagall Transfigured the gargoyles set into the towers, making them come to life and attack the opposing army. Professor Sinistra, being unable to summon a corporeal Patronus herself, used Cheering Charms on herself and the students around her to stave off the gloom emanating off of the dementors and beat them back, laughing triumphantly all the while. Cooking club members Lisa Turpin, Sophie Roper, and Oliver Rivers transfigured a set of Gobstones to ten times their usual size and chucked them over their heads at the Death Eaters, who were blinded by the purple ooze that the stones spat into their faces. One of Owen’s friends from Hufflepuff, Tamsin Applebee, broke into Greenhouse Three and swiped a potted Devil’s Snare, which he magically planted into the ground over the stairs leading to the front door of the castle so that it snatched up any Death Eater who tried to climb them.

Cho and Dean Thomas were fighting side by side against two masked Death Eaters when a trio of dementors came swooshing down on them. Cho lashed her wand above her and Dean’s heads.

“Expecto Patronum!”

A silvery white swan flew out of her wand, beating the dementors back. A moment later a similarly colored, misty albatross joined it, snapping its beak at the beasts' rotted hands.

Dean and Cho looked up to see Oliver Wood flying overhead on his broomstick.

"Watch yourselves!" said Wood concernedly. "*Stupefy!*"

His spell just barely missed the two masked assailants' heads. A moment later Wood had to fly out of the way to avoid one of the giants' massive feet slamming into the ground.

Cho and Dean turned to each other, their eyes lighting up in excitement. Wood had the right idea – it'd be harder for their enemies to reach them if they were off the ground, like when Harry faced the Hungarian Horntail during the Triwizard Tournament –

"*ACCIO BROOMS!*" shouted Dean, slapping his wand at the air in the direction of the Quidditch pitch.

Within seconds, there was a distant *crash* and a high-pitched *swish* as two broomsticks came whipping through the air toward them. Cho beat the two Death Eaters back, knocking them off their feet, and then seized one of the broomsticks out of mid-air and leapt on, kicking off from the ground. She and Dean soared into the air, holding their wands aloft so that their swan and dolphin Patronuses could lash away at the dementors' darkening fog.

Millicent, meanwhile, ran clumsily up from the dungeons, her robe pockets and satchel full of about fifty different kinds of sealed potions.

She was never very good at wizard dueling – heck, halfway through her "duel" with Hermione in second year, she'd gotten so frustrated that she tossed her wand aside in favor of her fists – but Millicent knew there were *other* strengths she could play to...

It was fortunate that everyone had been cleared out of the Room of Requirement. About a half hour after Harry, Ron, and Hermione had gone into it, they came soaring out on a set of three brooms, Draco Malfoy and Gregory Goyle on the back of Harry and Ron's, just barely avoiding a giant swatch of animalistic flames that engulfed the room.

As they flew out, Harry chucked the diadem of Ravenclaw into the Fiendfyre. The golden flames flared a horrible violet, shrieking and spewing suffocating black smoke, and Hermione, stumbling off of her broom clumsily, dashed over to the door of the Room and slammed it shut. In an instant, the terrifying explosive, screaming sounds ceased.

“C-Crabbe,” mumbled Draco, as he stared at the shut door in disbelief and horror.

“He’s dead,” said Ron.

Realizing a little too late how blunt he’d been, he looked away uncomfortably. It was clear that Draco regretted what had happened, but at the same time, Crabbe had been trying to *kill* them not too long ago, so it was hard to feel sorry for him.

Hermione bent down to check Goyle’s pulse.

“He’s unconscious, but he’ll be all right,” she said. She tried to offer Draco a kind look, but the pale Slytherin avoided her gaze.

Harry walked over to Draco, his face very solemn. When the two locked eyes, Draco’s face contorted with anger as he got to his feet.

“I thought I told you to *never* get that close to getting caught again, Potter,” Draco spat, his stormy gray eyes flaring.

“I probably wouldn’t have, if you and your buddies hadn’t shown up,” said Harry coolly.

“Crabbe and Goyle were trying to capture you so they could hand you over,” Draco shot back. “If I hadn’t gone with them, they might have actually *done* it.”

“Somehow I doubt Crabbe and Goyle thought of the Room of Requirement as a place to look for us,” accused Ron.

Draco reached into his robes for his wand. Harry, Ron, and Hermione all raised theirs quickly, but Draco in the end was left empty-handed: his wand had gotten lost in the Fiendfyre-ravaged Room of Requirement.

“Get out of here,” Draco snarled at Harry, clenching his fists at his sides. “*Now.*”

“Or what?” asked Ron. “You’ll try to *make* us? I’d love to see *you* try to throw a punch – ”

“Don’t forget, that’s *my* wand you’re using, Potter,” Draco said venomously. “It obeys me first and foremost. That’s how wands work.”

Harry glanced down at the hawthorn wand Draco had given him at Malfoy Manor and then back up at Draco’s face.

“If you want it back,” said Harry, “take it.”

He turned it around, holding the wand tip so that Draco could reach the handle. Draco flinched back.

“Don’t be daft,” he mumbled harshly.

“What’s the matter?” asked Harry. “It’s yours. I don’t need to keep borrowing it.”

“Oh, *sure*, you don’t,” snapped Draco, his lips crooked up in a humorless smirk, “giving away the wand that would probably work the best for you out of all the random sticks you could come across in this general area; you *brainless feck*, I’m not asking you to be *polite*, I’m telling you to grow a *brain*! The Dark Lord wants your head on a *pike*! You have any idea what he might do to *get* it?! You have any idea what’ll happen if he *does* get it?!”

Harry’s eyebrows came together in irritation and confusion, but Draco was in no mood to explain. He shoved Harry backward so hard that the ex-Gryffindor Seeker nearly fell off his feet; then Draco swept over to Goyle, hoisting him up onto his shoulder as best he could, and started to head away up the hall, his teeth gnashing together in frustration.

“Malfoy, we *can’t* just focus on ourselves!” Hermione said desperately. “It’s too dangerous for all of us to do that. You know that too, don’t you? That’s why you helped us, back at Malfoy Manor...”

Draco stopped mid-step, the unconscious Goyle flopping down onto his shoulder. He stood stock still and silent, seeming both unable to turn around and unsure of how to answer.

The pale Slytherin didn’t get the chance to reply, for all of a sudden, the corridor quaked as pieces of the floor cracked apart under their feet. Harry darted forward, evading an acid-green-stained piece of rubble breaking off from the ceiling.

“Ron! Hermione!”

Hermione had summoned a Shield Charm around herself and Ron. Holding her wand aloft, she charged ahead through the dust, waving her wand at the ground.

“Reparo Totalum! Reparo Restorum!”

The fragments of floor clung together, melding itself precariously back into a fragile walkway. Harry cut across the floor to them: when he looked up, he saw that Draco and Goyle were already gone. Clearly Draco had decided it was better to cut and run, considering he no longer had a wand.

Down the hallway ran Fred and Percy Weasley, lashing out in turns against Thorfinn Rowle. The Death Eater looked quite a bit worse for the wear than when he’d helped break into Hogwarts the previous year – his veins were pitch black on his pale, contorted face and his eyes were wide and hollow as an Inferi’s as he badly shot green Killing Curses all around the two brothers’ heads.

“Missed again, old boy,” said Percy with an oddly cocky smile. “Here, let me try!”

He shot a red Stunning spell, which collided squarely with Rowle’s chest and threw him backwards into the wall.

Fred looked up at Percy, his face spread into an almost disbelieving grin.

“You’re *joking*, Perce!” he said in delight. “I haven’t heard you tell a joke since – ”

“GET DOWN!”

Both Percy and Fred were abruptly thrown forward off their feet; Millicent had appeared out of nowhere and flattened them both onto the floor just in time to avoid a large explosion just behind them. Debris went flying over their heads, knocking over suits of armor and crushing the unconscious form of Rowle.

Millicent straightened up first, and once she’d made sure the two men were alive, she exhaled tiredly as they quickly stumbled to their feet.

“Whew!” said Fred, eying the massive hole where his head had been seconds previously and grinning broadly at Millicent. “Thanks for that!”

Millicent grunted lowly, not knowing quite how to respond. Her brown eyes narrowing, she ran away down the hall with a potion bottle in hand, shooting a sharp look at Harry, Ron, and Hermione as she passed.

“Where the hell have *you* been, Potter?” Millicent shot coolly over her shoulder.

Harry smiled slightly despite himself. “Sorry – we were a little tied up – ”

Following the explosion came another cluster of Death Eaters. At the front was Etienne Montmercy, whose ice-blue eyes widened upon Harry.

“POTTER! IT’S POTTER!”

Harry barreled forward, Ron and Hermione behind him, as they charged down the Death Eaters. All the while, he tried desperately to shut the visions out of his mind – the visions of a deathly pale, skeletal, monstrous man decked all in black, waiting for Snape – *waiting for Severus* –

At last, after circumventing Gordon and Tana Ramsay and dodging several Killing Curses from rogue Death Eaters, Colin reached the courtyard.

The battle was in full swing, giants smashing into the walls surrounding the school and massive spiders infesting every inch of ground they could cover. McGonagall was dueling Rodolphus Lestranger, and at the center of the grounds, Colin caught sight of Hannah and Neville fighting back to back as they faced off against a pair of nasty-looking Snatchers. Overhead Madame Hooch and several ex-members of the Hogwarts Quidditch teams – Oliver Wood, Angelina Johnson, Dean Thomas, Terence Goodfellow, Charlie Weasley, Malcolm Preece, and Cho – were shooting spells from above. The dementors swarmed around them, sucking at the air, even as they summoned their Patronuses to beat them back.

As silly as it sounded in his head, Colin wished more than anything he'd had his camera on him. He knew he would never be able to describe this scene to anyone who hadn't been there – how thrilling, how chaotic, how mad, how fast, how *terrifying* it all was...

It was as Colin looked around that he saw it.

Antonin Dolohov had ended up on one of the giant's massive shoulders and, in a flash, blasted the Imperius Curse at Malcolm Preece. The ex-Hufflepuff Chaser swerved around, flying over toward Dolohov. As he flew past, Dolohov knocked the Chaser right off his broom and snatched it up himself. Preece catapulted downward, shaking his head as he struggled to retain consciousness –

"No!" yelled Colin.

He ran forward, but it was too late. The sea of dementors swarmed down on Preece, swallowing him up.

Shouting in alarm, Madame Hooch and Goodfellow swerved around, flying as fast as they could across the ground. They dived, shooting their eagle and King Cobra Patronuses at the dementors to break them apart. Reaching through the darkness, the two stretched out both wand arms and seized hold of Preece, lowering him down to the ground.

Colin barreled forward to help them hoist Preece up onto his back. The boy's breath caught in his throat, however, when he saw Preece's face: his blue eyes were glazed over and lifeless, hollower than a corpse's.

“*Colin!*” gasped Goodfellow when he realized who’d run up to them. “What are you *doing* here?”

Goodfellow’s concern made Colin feel both defensive and almost ashamed. “I came to help, of course!”

BAM! CRASH!

Dolohov blasted apart the side of the North Tower. Cho and Wood were on his tail, throwing spells at him, but they could only get so close when Dolohov was shooting green Killing Curses back at them.

“We can’t let him get into the Tower!” said Madame Hooch.

She immediately climbed back onto her broom, taking off into the air. Goodfellow whirled on Colin, his eyes very severe as he seized hold of the smaller boy’s shoulder.

“We need all the help we can get, so I won’t tell you to go,” said Goodfellow very lowly, “but *be safe*, you understand me?”

Colin nodded. “You too.”

Squeezing Colin’s shoulder, the Seeker-turned-journalist took off again. Colin clenched his jaw in determination and barreled back toward the school.

If Dolohov was trying to get into the school through the Tower, Colin *had* to make sure he didn’t get to the bottom of those stairs –

Lord Voldemort had decided not to join his forces for the Battle. He’d very quietly slipped away and let his minions do the dirty work. Most of those minions were enthusiastic in their support, but others were less so. Two of the masked Death Eaters in the ranks, for instance, deliberately kept their spells aimed high and their Shield Charms strong, for they had little interest in actually causing harm and much more in guarding their own self-preservation. And fortunately for Antony Greengrass and Europa Bulstrode, as they were flanking Bellatrix Lestrange and Fenrir Greyback,

they could easily disappear into the background behind them rather than draw attention to themselves.

Around the corner came Lavender Brown deep in battle with Alecto. At the sight of the pretty young Gryffindor, Greyback gave a disgusting, delighted snarl, and in an instant had leapt onto her from behind, his jaws descending onto her neck. Europa noticed Antony's frame cringe beside her but didn't dare say anything.

All of a sudden, out of nowhere, a blood red potion bottle crashed into Greyback's back. Greyback howled in pain as the liquid seeped into his flesh and the bones of his spine ripped out of his skin in bloody spikes, making him crumple up on the ground. Then a dark-haired, heavy-set Slytherin girl barreled forward, slamming her knee into the werewolf's stomach and throwing him backward off of Lavender.

"Get her to Ramsay," she barked at Ernie Macmillan, who had been just behind her and rushed forward to pick Lavender up.

Europa's eyes went very wide.

"*Millicent...*?" she said so softly that her voice was a fragile ghost of its usual self.

Millicent stiffened at the sound of her name. Her head shot around and her eyes widened upon the masked figure across the hall.

Her brief hesitation, however, had been all that Bellatrix needed. Before anyone could do anything, Bellatrix raised her wand, lighting it with terrible green.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

The green flash shot like an arrow across the hall, cutting through the air in a line that streaked from Bellatrix's wand into Millicent's cheek.

The heavyset Slytherin gave a great flinch. Then, her wide brown eyes darkening, she fell in a heap onto the floor.

It was as if time had frozen still. Ernie's scream didn't even seem to make any sound in Europa's ears as she stared at Millicent's prone form on the ground. The seconds stretched and the air chilled, and still nothing – Millicent didn't move, and neither did Europa – Millicent didn't breathe, and neither did she –

No – no – !

Europa threw herself forward in a run – her hood fell off and her golden-dyed hair went flying like a cape behind her, but she didn't care – she reached out her hand –

“*EXPELLIARMUS!*” screamed Ernie.

Europa was blasted backwards off her feet and thrown into the opposite wall. Her wand went flying up into the air as Bellatrix blasted more green Killing Curses across the hall, missing Ernie and Lavender by inches as the Hufflepuff prefect magically levitated Millicent's lifeless body at his side while still supporting Lavender on his back.

Antony dashed over to Europa's side, helping her to her feet.

“Europa, we need to get out of here – ”

Europa fought against Antony's hold, but seemed unable to speak. All she could do was gasp and choke for breath.

“We need to go *NOW!*” Antony repeated fiercely, but his usually stoic voice cracked.

He tore Europa away from the scene with all of his strength. He'd expected Europa to argue, even if it was pointless – but for once in her life, the best Wizengamot lawyer in Great Britain was at a loss for words.

Far above the rest of the battle, Antonin Dolohov had broken his way into the North Tower. Order members Dedalus Diggle and Elphias Doge confronted him at the landing and fought to push him back, but within minutes, Dolohov had cut them down, kicking their corpses aside as he made his

way down the stairs. Remus Lupin rushed to confront Dolohov, and although Remus valiantly beat Dolohov back up to the top of the Tower, the once-Defense-Against-the-Dark-Arts professor was clearly outmatched.

“It’s a shame Fenrir didn’t rub off more on you,” sneered Dolohov. “It’d be much more fun to tear down a raging beast than a little whelp like you – ”

“Forgive me, but I would prefer to not follow Greyback’s example in anything,” Lupin replied very coldly.

He blasted several yellow spells at Dolohov’s head, which the Death Eater easily blocked. Dolohov then lashed his wand at the ground, which ripped itself apart under Lupin’s feet and made him roll across the floor to escape the spear-like debris.

At that moment Tonks and Terry Boot reached the landing. In a flash, Tonks whipped her wand at the air, materializing thick white chains in mid-air that lashed Dolohov’s limbs together: then she threw him in a heap against the wall, far away from her husband.

“Dora,” breathed Lupin as she ran up to him.

“Harry said you went after Dolohov alone!” Tonks said anxiously. “What were you *thinking*?”

Lupin blinked. “Harry? Where is – ?”

Terry, who was still by the stairs, was the only one to see Dolohov break loose of his chains and point his wand at Lupin’s back. The Ravenclaw ran forward, his wand high.

“PROFESSOR – !”

“*Avada Kedavra!*” bellowed Dolohov.

A flare of green punched Lupin from behind, making his shoulders hunch forward. Tonks stared, her almond-shaped eyes very wide upon her husband’s face.

“*Remus!*”

In one fell swoop, Lupin’s legs buckled under him and he collapsed. Tonks caught him, shaking him desperately.

“*Remus! REMUS!*”

Just outside the North Tower, Cho, Goodfellow, Madame Hooch, and Wood flew in circles, trying to ward off the flood of dementors bearing down on the scene. Their focus was shattered, however, by a horrible, grief-filled scream.

Cho whirled around. Since Dolohov had broken open the wall of the Tower, she could just barely see what was happening inside.

Her heart stopped when she caught sight of Terry shooting spells at Dolohov and Tonks holding a limp, lifeless Lupin in her arms.

“Cho, watch out!” yelled Wood.

Cho turned just in time to see Madame Hooch summoning a Shield Charm around her. Rabastian Lestrange had also seized a broomstick and was now blasting spells at the four of them.

“He wants the dementors to reach Hogwarts,” said Goodfellow, his jaw clenching. “If their fog gets inside the school, everyone will lose the will to fight!”

Hooch clenched her jaw. “Well, we can’t have *that*, now can we?”

She raised her wand, lobbing her own spells back at Rabastian.

“*Stupefy! Locomotor Motis!*”

If Dolohov had outmatched Lupin, then Terry was a flat-out amateur to him. Within minutes Terry had been disarmed and thrown against the wall back first. Terry succeeded in yanking Dolohov's cloak over his head to blind him long enough to snatch back his wand, but in retaliation Dolohov shot a throbbing black curse right at Terry's head.

“GAAAAAARGGGGGHHH!”

Terry collapsed in on himself, clutching his right side of his face. The curse had blasted his eye open, splashing his face with blood and half-blinding him as the Dark magic ate away at the inside of his eye socket.

With a smirk, Dolohov raised his wand over the young man's head, lighting it with green –

“ARGH!”

Dolohov was yanked up off his feet by his ankle. The enchantment swung him around in several circles before it slammed him down hard into the floor.

Her eyes full of grieving, wrathful tears, Tonks rose to her feet, her wand blazing with violet light.

“Stay back!” she shot over her shoulder at Terry when he tried and failed to get to his feet.

“Dolohov is mine!”

While Cho and Goodfellow beat back the dementors, Wood and Madame Hooch lashed out in turns against Rabastian. The Death Eater sensed pretty quickly that he was not a good enough flyer to keep up with the four Quidditch players, and tried to drive Hooch and Wood away from the others.

Cho, guiding her white swan Patronus with her wand in a figure eight over her head, shot a look down at the Tower. Tonks and Dolohov were in the middle of a confrontation. Spells flew

everywhere, smashing into each other and breaking the walls of the Tower open even more. And at the very back of the hall, shrunken up in a pained, weak ball on the ground, was Terry, his face shriveled up on one side and oozing blood.

Cho whirled on Goodfellow, her face white with panic.

“I have to go help Terry!”

Leaving Goodfellow alone, Cho dove for the North Tower. Goodfellow tried to follow her, but was stopped when Rabastian shot a Killing Curse at him that just barely missed his right shoulder.

“You’re the Higgs boy, aren’t you?” jeered Rabastian. “How sad to see someone from *our* house babysitting blood traitor brats –”

Goodfellow swerved his King Cobra Patronus at Rabastian to blind him and then kicked the older man right in the chest, knocking him backward.

“You and I may both have been in Slytherin,” Goodfellow spat, “but it has *never* been ‘*your* house.’”

Rabastian lashed out, shooting more curses at the air. Goodfellow was able to dodge all but one of them, which collided with his arm and made him fall back against his broom as he tried to stabilize his grip on his wand.

“Ack!”

Rabastian lifted his wand again, only to get slammed into from behind by Madame Hooch. The Death Eater lost hold of his broom and instead grabbed onto Hooch’s – the two both catapulted downward, struggling amongst themselves to stay in the air –

“No!” shouted Wood.

He dove, reaching a hand out. Hooch struggled to dislodge herself from Rabastian, fighting to stay on her broom while also reaching for Wood’s hand –

But before she could take it, Rabastian slashed at the air with his wand. The knife-like curse collided with Hooch's neck, slitting it open. Hooch choked, unable to breathe. Then she fell off her broom like dead weight.

"NOOOOO!" Wood screamed.

He dived after her, whipping his wand at the ground to slow her fall. He then catapulted himself off his broomstick, running over to Madame Hooch and lifting her bloodied form up off the ground.

But it was no use. She was gone.

Stunned and horrified, Terry tried desperately to blink the blood out of his eyes. Tonks and Dolohov were fighting to the death, but he couldn't see well enough to be of any help. The Death Eater conjured a choking, dementor-like shroud around Tonks – she ripped through it with white flares from her wand. The pink-haired Auror encased Dolohov in a giant crystal ball – he smashed it open, throwing knife-like shards in all directions.

Then, all of a sudden, outside the open wall of the Tower, a red Stunning spell just barely missed Dolohov's ear.

It was Cho. She flew just outside the Tower, blasting more red hexes at Dolohov.

The Death Eater bared his teeth at the young Ravenclaw and, shooting a look over his shoulder at Tonks, flung out his wand, thrusting a swath of Fiendfyre at Cho.

Cho was a good enough flier that she avoided the spell easily. What she'd not expected was the Dark fire being more "alive" than normal flames. In seconds the Fiendfyre had grown, taking on the shape of a lion that clamped down on the tail of Cho's broom.

"AH!"

The abrupt shift in weight made Cho lose her balance. Her wand tumbled out of her hand when she clung onto the broom quaking under her, trying to stay airborne.

Tonks, being the Auror she was, immediately put aside her thirst for vengeance in the interest of saving Cho. Unfortunately as soon as she moved, Dolohov slashed a deadly violet curse at the air, which collided with the back of Tonks' head.

Tonks stilled, a quiet gasp of pain falling from her lips.

“Oh – ”

The injury didn't show on the outside, but the damage inside was fatal, when delivered to the brain. Her shockingly pink hair slowly changed, the rosy color flickering and dying as it faded away to a mousy brown: then Tonks landed on the ground with a soft *flump*, only a few feet away from where Remus had fallen moments before.

With her broom already a fourth of the way devoured by the Fiendfyre, Cho knew there was only one choice. With all of her strength, she threw herself into the air, seizing the edge of the broken North Tower with both hands.

“Ah!”

Her fingers slipped, unable to hold on. She scraped desperately with her feet against the stone, trying desperately to secure herself.

Then, all of a sudden, two hands seized Cho's, trying to hoist her up. Even if he could still barely see through the blood streaming from his right eye, Terry had lunged forward and grabbed onto her hands, pulling up with all of his strength.

“Grab onto my arms!” he shouted. “It'll help me lift you!”

Cho dug her fingers into Terry's robes and he helped yank her up onto the landing. As soon as she arrived there, though, Dolohov came up behind them.

Cho opened her mouth to scream, but before any sound could leave her lips, another voice shot through the air.

“Expelliarmus!”

Dolohov’s wand went flying out of his hand. The Death Eater whirled around, and Cho and Terry both gaped at whom they saw.

“Colin!” cried Cho in relief.

Colin pointed his wand straight at Dolohov’s chest, looking fearless even though he was but a fraction of the man’s height.

“Leave my friends alone,” Colin said fiercely.

Dolohov looked upon Colin as if he were some puny insect he was about to squash with his foot. His eyes flickered to something behind the tiny Gryffindor, and his mouth spread into a sinister smile.

“Very brave last words,” he said icily.

Colin’s face scrunched up in confusion. Then, out of nowhere, green light soared up the stairwell behind Colin, knocking him down to the ground.

The small Gryffindor was on his knees for a few seconds, his brown eyes very wide and hollow. Then they slid closed as easily as if he’d fallen asleep and he slumped forward, his breath stilling on his lips.

“NO!” screamed Cho. *“Colin! COLIN!”*

Etienne Montmercy strode up the stairwell, his wand held high as he surveyed the tiny boy he’d just felled.

“Accio,” murmured Montmercy, catching Dolohov’s wand in mid-air as it soared over to him.
“Here you are, my friend.”

“Thank you,” Dolohov answered very coolly.

Dolohov and Montmercy turned to Terry and Cho. Before either of them could raise their wands again, however, they stilled at the sound of the terrible, monstrous voice once again reverberating through the walls and floors.

As luck would have it, Noel – Trudy sitting on the broom behind them – had just completed their four-hour-long flight from Suffolk and made it over the Forbidden Forest when Lord Voldemort’s voice erupted over the grounds.

“You have fought valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery.”

Noel halted in mid-air, their head turning back toward Trudy. The older woman’s face had gone very white.

“Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste.”

“Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat immediately. You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured.”

“I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me – have not given yourself up – then battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter. I shall find you...and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me.”

“One hour.”

Noel felt their hands shaking on the handle of their broomstick. Clenching their fists tightly, they faced the school with a fierce gleam in their hazel eye.

“Come on,” they said to Trudy, “we have to get down there.”

Noel shifted forward slightly, urging their broom to barrel down toward the school as fast as it could take them.

And So I'll March On

When the Death Eaters, dementors, Snatchers, Acromantula, and giants withdrew from Hogwarts, it felt like all of the air had been sucked out of the school, leaving a hollow husk in its place. No one moved or spoke for a good minute, before Professor McGonagall broke the silence to urge the others on to the Great Hall.

At the Hog's Head, Horace Slughorn and the only remaining students – Dennis, Kevin, Astoria, Daphne, and Pansy – had been sitting in clumps around the pub when Winky the house elf appeared out of nowhere with a *CRACK* that shattered the silence.

“Winky!” said Slughorn. He leapt off of the bar stool closest to the pub window and bustled over to her. “Do you have news from Minerva?”

“Yes, Master Slughorn,” squeaked Winky. Her long-fingered hands were trembling as they clutched the front of her apron. “Th-the Headmistress says that the Death Eaters have retreated back to the Forest, but the g-giants have blocked the roads leading to Hogsmeade.”

“That means the Knight Bus won't be able to come back anytime soon,” murmured Slughorn, and his eyes narrowed soberly.

Winky nodded. “H-Headmistress McGonagall says to send any remaining students home b-by Floo Powder...and then to come back...if you still w-wish to fight.”

Dennis, Kevin, and Astoria all whirled on Slughorn.

“We're not going anywhere – ”

“Professor, you can't – ”

“Professor, please – ”

Slughorn held up both of his hands to silence them.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he said firmly. “The Floo Network may no longer be in the hands of the Death Eaters, but I doubt the Ministry is stable enough to have fixed its connections. I’m not taking the risk that the Network might redirect you somewhere else because you were trying to travel without Ministry approval.”

He stole another glance out the pub window, his eyes betraying some anxiety.

Dennis barreled over, his face urgent. “Winky, can you Disapparate into the castle?”

“Why – yes, sir,” said Winky, almost surprised that she had to confirm it.

“Then you can Apparate us over!” Dennis said, his face torn between determination and excitement. “Winky, I need you to take me there, right now – ”

Slughorn opened his mouth as if to say something, and Kevin hurriedly cut him off.

“Please, Professor,” begged the Hufflepuff, “Colin’s – ”

Slughorn shot Kevin a look to quiet him. He then turned to Winky solemnly.

“Winky, take Kevin and Dennis with you. Once you find Colin, I want all three boys brought right back here.”

Kevin’s face brightened, breaking into a relieved smile.

Winky nodded; taking hold of both boys’ hands, she gave a little jump and all three of them vanished with another *CRACK*.

Professor McGonagall had instructed that all of the dead and wounded be brought to the Great Hall. The four long House tables were gone and everyone gathered together, hugging each other and crying. The injured were levitated on stretchers to the back of the room, while the forty-five dead were lined up on the marble floor in a row.

Some people had gathered around the assembled bodies. Parvati Patil comforted her sister Padma as they knelt together beside a lifeless Michael Corner. Noel sat beside the body of their teammate from the Ravenclaw team, Gerald Vickers, leaning their head on Trudy's shoulder as the old woman murmured comforting words in their ear. Terence Goodfellow, his husband Evander beside him, bent down next to once-Head Boy Hector Summerby and gently slid the younger man's eyes closed with his hand. Kingsley and McGonagall were quietly paying their respects beside Elphias Doge, while Fred, George, Alicia, Katie Bell, and Angelina Johnson tried hopelessly to comfort Oliver Wood as he sobbed over Madame Hooch's prone form.

Hannah and Neville entered the Great Hall just in time to see Harry walk out, avoiding eye contact with anyone.

"Harry?" whispered Hannah.

But Harry didn't seem to hear her. He left the Great Hall alone, his green eyes so distant it was like his mind was a million miles away.

Neville watched Harry go, before he sadly turned to look at the line of bodies.

Ron and Hermione sat huddled up on the floor, crying quietly together. Cho was bent down beside them, tears streaming down her face silently. As Hannah approached, her eyes caught sight of the bodies just behind them, just to the left of Remus Lupin and Tamsin Applebee.

Lying together side by side were two prone frames: one was a broad-shouldered and round young woman with dark hair and a Slytherin tie, and the other was a very short and scrawny boy with blond hair and wearing a blue sports jacket.

Hannah felt like the floor under her had shattered to pieces and she was falling sickeningly through the air. She ran forward, her brown eyes very wide as they flooded with tears.

"NOOOO!"

Cho, Ron, and Hermione all looked up, alarmed. Neville dashed after Hannah as she slid across the floor, barely feeling the pain in her scraped knees.

“Hannah!” said Neville as he quickly came down behind her, grabbing her shoulders.

“*No* – no, *no*!”

All Hannah could do was scream. Tears streamed from her eyes as she clutched at Millicent’s shoulders, looking from her to Colin, taking in their empty, bloodless faces. Her shoulders shook horribly and she broke down into full sobs. Neville wrapped both of his arms around her, burying his face in her blond hair, as she howled in despair, crying harder than she had since her mother died.

Not Millicent – not Colin – not her friends – not more of her friends –

“*Colin!*?”

Everyone froze, the tears stilling in their eyes, at the sound of a young boy’s voice.

It was Dennis Creevey. He had charged into the Hall, his eyes darting in every direction as he took in the people scattered around the room. Running just behind Dennis was Kevin.

“*Colin!*?” Dennis called out again, his fast, high-pitched voice strained with anxiety.

“Colin!” bellowed Kevin too, his voice calmer than Dennis, but still audibly worried.

“*Colin?! Col – !?*”

When Dennis had pushed himself through the crowds and reached the line of bodies, his eyes finally found his brother laying amongst them. He halted, his breath stilling in his throat. Kevin appeared behind Dennis a few seconds later and he let out a strangled gasp.

For a moment, Dennis merely stood there, staring down at Colin’s motionless frame. His head

shakily rocked back and forth of its own accord as he stared, his eyes narrowing with every second upon his brother's pale, lifeless face. His eyes sparkled with tears, but they didn't fall: it was as if they were glued onto his eyelids, unmovable and hard as diamonds, even as his face contorted and his shoulders hunched over as if he'd been punched in the stomach.

Kevin turned to the younger Creevey, his long-lashed eyes rippling with grief and concern.

"Dennis – "

He reached out a hand, but his fingers barely made contact with Dennis's shoulder before Dennis roughly tore himself away, shoving himself past everyone else to get to Colin. Falling onto his knees, he silently bent over and plastered himself over his older brother's chest, hiding his face so that no one could see it.

Tears streamed from Kevin's eyes as he covered his mouth and turned away, trying desperately to quell his own grief. Cho covered her mouth with both of her hands too, her teary eyes softening with pain and guilt as she watched Dennis cling to Colin's body. Neville squeezed Hannah even more tightly when she began to sob again, and Hermione and Ron buried their faces into the crooks of each other's necks in a vain attempt to comfort each other.

At the back of the Great Hall, Gordon Ramsay sat at Lavender Brown's bedside, dabbing Dittany and Healing Potions to the wounds on her neck and chest. He kept his back turned to the line of bodies and focused solely on his work, his jaw set tightly.

Tana, however, wasn't fooled by his attempt at stoicism. One hand still on her very round, pregnant belly, she carefully lowered herself down to the ground so that she was sitting next to her husband, her teary eyes floating from Lavender's unconscious body to up at Ramsay's face.

"Gordon..." she murmured.

Ramsay didn't answer.

"Gordon, let me," Tana said softly.

“No,” said Ramsay vaguely, “I’ve got it, darling.”

He didn’t look up at her. He probably couldn’t.

Her chocolate brown eyes narrowing through her tears, Tana reached out and took hold of the bottle in Ramsay’s hand.

“Give it to me, Gordon,” she said, her soft voice much firmer than before but no less kind.

Ramsay stilled. His eyes were still locked on Lavender’s injuries, but they no longer seemed to see them. Tana took advantage of his lack of focus to slide the bottle from his grip, and she started dabbing the potion to Lavender’s wounds in his place.

Gordon Ramsay had never been at a loss of things to say. His moral compass was absolute and his wit and insight had always made starting an argument with him a dangerous proposition. But the one thing that Ramsay had never been properly able to express, both as a child and especially as an adult, was grief. When the McKinnon family was slaughtered, he stopped attending classes for a week. When the Dark Lord killed Dorcas Meadowes, he was sent to the Hospital Wing after not eating in five days. When James and Lily had died, he had been unable to go to their funeral. When Frank and Alice were tortured into insanity, he refused to see them in St. Mungo’s, no matter how many years had gone by. When Dumbledore was murdered, he couldn’t bear to listen to anyone mourning him. When his father had been killed...he didn’t speak to anyone for weeks...

“ Not everyone is a soldier, Harry . Dumbledore never learned that, but I’m sure you can. I took this job at Hogwarts to teach Potions and to help the students – not fight Dumbledore’s battles...”

His hand, raised and slightly crooked as if it were still holding the potion bottle, trembled as Ramsay slowly lowered it.

Help the students. That was why Ramsay had taken the position of Potions master two years ago. There had been no teacher to try to shield him from the First Wizarding War while he was at school. He’d been forced into it – just like James, Alice, and the other upperclassmen had been – and more than anything, Ramsay hadn’t wanted the same thing to happen to anyone else. He’d wanted his students to be happy, to make new friends, and to study hard – the way students should be *allowed* to – but once again, that was taken away from them. The world had taken that right away from them – *stolen* it from them, for no reason at all – just like last time –

“It won’t be like it was last time.”

“Wishful thinking.”

The memory of Snape made Ramsay’s shoulders tense up with fury and pain.

It was supposed to be *different*. He’d worked so hard to make *sure* it would be different. He’d tried so hard to bring the school together, to give the students some peace, some hope, in the face of so much despair –

Yet after everything...after all the work he’d put in...was it all for nothing? Had everything he’d done...meant nothing at all?

Tana put down the potion bottle and took hold of her husband’s shoulders.

“I know, Gordon,” she murmured. Her eyes filled up with tears as she leaned her face up against his back. “I know.”

Ramsay bowed his head, his shoulders quaking. Then, at long last, he finally broke down. He crumpled in on himself, covering his face with both hands, and sobbed like a child.

Winky returned to the Hog’s Head with the news of Colin and Millicent’s fates. When the elf told Slughorn, the Greengrass sisters, and Pansy about what had happened to Millicent, she broke down in tears, collapsing to the floor and pulling down hard on her own ears in mad anguish, before disappearing back to the school with a loud *CRACK*.

Astoria hid her face in her hands and began to cry. Her face torn by frustration, anger, pain, and grief, Pansy escaped into the far corner of the pub by the fireplace, clutching her forearms with both hands. Daphne closed her eyes, her expression contorting in pain like she’d been shot, and she turned away, leaving the pub altogether.

Daphne stood outside alone, staring up at the darkened castle for a very long time.

Millicent had been the only Slytherin to stay behind. At the time, Daphne didn't quite understand why...but as she stood there alone, she took the time to consider the matter...and what she realized was that that moment was Millicent's best chance.

From the moment Daphne had first met her, Millicent had always been the strong and silent type. People thought she wasn't very smart, but she was rough and tough enough that no one would think of messing with her. Whereas Daphne intimidated people by being gorgeous and cold, Millicent had done it by being aggressive. But that image, like Daphne's, had only been skin deep, for Millicent was compassionate, talented, and noble. The only reason no one else knew it was because Millicent wasn't witty enough to throw out good comebacks, or even talk much at all. More often than not, the best way for Millicent to deal with a problem ended up involving punching it in the face – if she wasn't able to fight her way through, she was at a loss. When Alecko tortured Astoria, Millicent couldn't punch her way through. Even when Pansy had bullied Bridget the previous year, Millicent didn't stand up for her any more than Daphne did. So that moment – that moment where one had to decide whether to fight or fly – was the last chance Millicent thought she might ever have to make a difference. She wasn't good at talking, and she wasn't good at deception – but what she'd always been was a fighter. Even if she had to throw away her wand and use her fists, this was likely the only arena Millicent could envision where she would've had a chance to do some good.

'If I'd stayed too,' Daphne couldn't help but think, 'might I have been able to – ?'

The thought hurt her too much, and she shoved it away fiercely. There was no sense in thinking back on past mistakes...not when things were still so dangerous...

"It's okay. I'm sure you'll come up with something – you've always been smart."

Millicent had expected that she'd come up with an idea of how to help. Daphne just wished she could think up that idea...

A murky memory came back to her – one of herself, standing in a common room stuffed with Slytherins in her nightgown and robe, looking around for someone to come up with an idea of how to get information without leaving the dorm...when who should offer a solution but Millicent –

Daphne's eyes widened. Whirling around on the spot, she fixed a fierce eye at the sky.

"Koko!" she said very firmly to no one. "Qubie! Niknak! Hardy!"

CRACK. CRACK, CRACK. CRACK.

In a second, Daphne's, Colin's, Kevin's, and Bridget's house elf partners appeared in the center of the street out of thin air.

"You called, Miss Daphne?" chirped Koko, fluttering the lashes of her round pink eyes.

"Yes," said Daphne firmly. "Koko, I need you and the others to go get reinforcements. Go get Hyperion Carrow – Antoinette Montmercy – *anyone* who's willing to help. Go get Lucius Malfoy – tell him that his family is here and that they need his help. Bring them all back to the school as quick as you can."

Koko and the other elves beamed from ear to ear.

"Yes, Miss!"

With a loud CRACK, all four disappeared once more.

At Beau Plumpton's house, the air was tense. No one had been able to go back to sleep, not even as dawn drew near.

Lucius had been playing the piano in the office for hours now. Rose sat on the floor with Pogo, Darcy, and Mr. Whiskers, while Beau sat on the couch, trying to read yesterday's newspaper but unable to focus on it.

The stillness was broken by a loud CRACK announcing the arrival of a hard-faced house elf that had suddenly appeared on the coffee table in the center of the room. Mr. Whiskers and Darcy both darted under the couch, startled by the noise; Pogo began to bark loudly at the intruder, and Rose hurried to pull the golden retriever back by his collar.

"*Hardy!*" Rose recognized the elf at once excitedly. "What are you doing here?"

Lucius appeared in the doorframe of the sitting room as Hardy bounced on the tips of his coffee-colored toes.

“Hardy is seeking Lucius Malfoy!” he said in his slightly lower, squeaking voice as his round brown eyes landed on the blond-haired wizard. “Miss Daphne Greengrass sent me to fetch you! She told Hardy to tell you that your family is at Hogwarts!”

Lucius’s face blanched visibly. “*What?!?*”

“Daphne sent you!?” said Rose in delight. “Where is she? Where’s Astoria?”

“Miss Daphne and Miss Astoria are in Hogsmeade,” said Hardy stoutly. “Both are safe. But Miss Daphne told Hardy to bring Lucius Malfoy to Hogwarts at once – Miss Daphne says that his family needs his help!”

Lucius looked torn between terror and urgency. Before he could say anything, however, Beau brought a hand onto his shoulder.

“If your family needs help,” he said with a smile, “then we’ll come with you.”

Lucius gaped at Beau.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he muttered scornfully. “You’re a *Squib*, what in the world could *you* do against – ?”

“Not much, I’m sure,” said Beau stridently.

He went over to the front door and snatched up the magical briefcase that had once belonged to his grandmother off the floor.

“But,” he said while tossing an Invisibility Cloak, a set of Shield gloves, and a can of pepper spray into the briefcase, “there’s no way I can in good conscience let three of my four wards go off to

war without me, and I'm sure Rose would refuse to stay here alone even if I *tried* to leave her behind."

"Mr. Plumpton, you and the bantling wouldn't last two *minutes* against the Dark Lord's forces," spat Lucius.

"So you'd prefer to face those forces alone?" asked Beau coolly, his eyes narrowing upon Lucius's face even as his eyebrows rose.

Lucius gave something of a scowl, his features contorting with discomfort and irritation. Beau's face broke into a warm, almost cocky smile.

"Look, Lucius...sometimes you have to face the odds, even if they're against you. And sometimes an army is built more on trust and friendship than on brute force. Maybe you might have to protect us...but we, in turn, can also protect *you*."

A grin consuming her face, Rose leapt to her feet and grabbed Lucius's iron and leather hand in hers.

"Come on, Mr. Malfoy, there's no way we'd let you face You-Know-Who on your own!" she said brightly. "We'll find your family, and we'll make sure they're safe! Okay?"

Lucius hesitated, his gray eyes rippling in bewilderment. Then, finally, he extended his free leather hand to Beau.

"Hand me one of those Cloaks – it'd be best if I weren't seen. Then I want you *both* inside that briefcase. It's not like I can use Side-Along-Apparition with *two* people..."

Once the elves were gone, Daphne went back inside. Pansy looked up from her seat near the fireplace, but didn't speak. Astoria immediately got to her feet and walked over.

"Daphne?"

Daphne's face was very pale as she reached out and took both of Astoria's hands.

"I'm going back," she whispered.

Astoria's eyes widened with concern.

"I'm coming with you –" she started at once.

"No, you're not," Daphne cut her off.

When Astoria opened her mouth to argue, Daphne held both of Astoria's hands up between them, her dark eyes very serious.

"These hands...belong to a Healer. She hasn't been certified yet, but that doesn't make her any less of one. These hands are not meant to take a life. I know they never could – no matter how wretched of a life it may be, or how justified."

Daphne smiled softly.

"Give the burden of fighting to me, Stori...and I'll fight for both of us."

Astoria faltered, her gaze darting from her and Daphne's hands to her sister's face and back. Then her light blue eyes flooded with more tears and she threw herself forward, wrapping her arms around Daphne and clinging onto her with all of her strength.

"We'd be glad to have you with us, Daphne."

The Greengrass sisters looked up at Slughorn, who stood beside the door of the Hog's Head, his mouth and white walrus-like mustache upturned in a warm smile as he opened it.

CRACK. CRACK. CRACK.

A flurry of Disapparating sounds echoed through the night, shattering the icy silence. Astoria, Daphne, and Pansy's faces wrinkled in confusion as they got up and dashed over to the open doorframe.

Just outside the pub were dozens of witches and wizards appearing out of the black, all dressed in colorful robes and holding their wands high. Some looked like they had gotten dressed in a hurry, but all looked healthy, rosy-cheeked, and determined.

"Who – ?" stammered Pansy, her confusion marred by disgust. "Who are – ?"

"I gave every evacuating student a letter to their parents, explaining our present predicament," said Slughorn jovially, "and as I'd hoped, they have something to say to the Death Eaters about their children's lives being threatened..."

"Daphne! Astoria!"

Out of the fold came Theia Greengrass, dressed in lacy forest green robes with her dark hair pinned up in a butterfly-shaped bun at the back of her head.

"*Mother!*" cried Astoria.

At the sight of her daughters, Theia threw aside all composure and grabbed hold of both of them, stroking their hair as if they were two of her favorite porcelain dolls.

"Mother," said Daphne urgently, "where's Father?"

Theia's face was very white as she searched her children's faces for injuries.

"Your father was at the Ministry when everyone revolted – there's a warrant out for his arrest, but he hasn't returned home..."

"Then he *is* with the Death Eaters," murmured Daphne. "Millicent's mother must be too."

She glanced up at Cadoc Bulstrode, who had appeared just behind Theia. Millicent's slender, sleek-brown-haired father clenched his jaw tightly.

"Europa and Antony should be safe as long as they stay in line," said Cadoc cynically, "but only that long. I just hope Narcissa's out there with them..."

CRACK.

Astoria looked up over her mother's shoulder and saw one more long-nosed, black-haired figure had appeared. He released Niknak's hand so he could adjust the collar of his neatly tailored black robes, which had come undone in transit, and looked around at where he'd arrived. At the sight of the Greengrasses, his eyes – which shone the same shade of light blue as Theia and Astoria's – lit up like stars.

Astoria pulled away from her mother and dashed over to the man, her eyes filling up with tears of joy as she threw her arms around his neck in a huge hug.

"Uncle Hyperion!"

Hyperion Carrow brought his arms around Astoria, swinging her back and forth as she dangled off his neck like a rag doll. Daphne immediately dashed over as well; Hyperion brought his free arm around her, hugging both of his nieces tightly to his chest.

"My little buds," he murmured in their ears. "Oh, how good it is to see you..."

He kissed the tops of their heads. Daphne smiled slightly, while Astoria beamed from ear to ear at him.

"Uncle Hyperion, what are you doing here?" she asked.

Hyperion's mouth spread into a broad white smirk that shined as brightly as the gold and diamond teardrop earring in his left ear.

“My sweet Aster flower, how could I *not* be here? This is history in the making! So long have I studied Wizarding history and taught it to others, but when will the time come again that I can make a stamp on it myself?”

He glanced at Theia with a small, mischievous smile. His light blue eyes then landed on Cadoc and the two exchanged an oddly long, soft look.

CRACK. CRACK. CRACK.

More and more witches and wizards began to appear, some through Disapparition and some alongside the Hogwarts house elves. Among them were Chaaya and Rohan Belaji, Augusta Longbottom, Amos Diggory, Tokala Kyon Mulligan, and Mia Romero.

“The hour He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named gave us is almost up,” Slughorn shouted over the crowd. “We must begin the march – if anyone else arrives, they can reconnect with us en route!”

Her dark eyes narrowing, Daphne reached out and took both Astoria and Pansy’s hands.

“Daphne – ” sputtered Pansy, “w-what are you – ?”

Daphne led both of them over to Niknak’s side.

“Niknak,” she told the elf, “I want you to take Astoria and Pansy to the safest place in the castle, so they can wait there until the battle is over. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Miss Daphne,” Niknak said brightly.

He extended both of his long fingered hands. Astoria took one politely, but Pansy looked reluctant to follow suit.

“Daphne – ” she said, her voice becoming oddly harsh as she struggled to contain her emotions, “Daphne, you can’t do this! Think of *Millicent*, Daphne – ”

Daphne's eyes softened upon Pansy's pug-like face.

"I am," she said. "And I'm thinking of you both too."

She firmly shifted Pansy's hand over so that Niknak could take it; then the elf disappeared with a *CRACK*, taking both Astoria and Pansy with him.

Taking a deep breath, Daphne turned on her heel and skipped to catch up with Slughorn and the others marching back up toward the school.

It took a while for Koko the house elf to find Antoinette Montmercy, given that she was still with her son at the Bulgarians' safe house. When the little elf arrived, all of the patients around the house and the people protecting it whirled around to face her, tensing anxiously. Then Bridget and Rudolf's faces broke out into wide smiles.

"*KOKO!*" they cried in unison.

"Miss Bridget!" said Koko brightly, as she hopped over to Bridget's bedside and hugged her arm. "Oh, Miss Daphne will be so very, *very* happy to know that you are safe!"

"You have seen my Laurel?" said Rudolf urgently.

"Is she all right?" asked Bridget.

"Miss Daphne sent me to find Antoinette Montmercy!" squeaked Koko.

Antoinette got up from Julien's bed at last and came over, her posture visibly wary.

"And *why* were you supposed to find me?"

Koko clutched her long-fingered hands in front of her. “Miss Daphne sent Koko to get help! The Death Eaters have attacked Hogwarts! The teachers and students need help – many are already hurt or dead, Madam Montmercy – ”

Both Viktor and Iskra shot to their feet.

“Then we must go and help them!” said Viktor decisively.

Rudolf nodded as he likewise stood up. “We’ll have to Apparate into Hogsmeade and then walk... Georgi, can you take care of the patients here?”

“*Da*, of course,” said Georgi.

Antoinette bent down beside the sleeping Julien, her expression visibly torn. Then she closed her eyes soberly.

“I can’t go,” she murmured. “I can’t leave my baby – not right now.”

Rudolf brought a hand down onto her shoulder. “I understand.”

He then turned to Bridget with a small wry smile.

“See you on the other side,” he said.

And in a flash, he, Viktor, Iskra, and Koko all vanished.

Fear Versus Love

The bell in the Hogwarts clock tower tolled the hour, bounding over the grounds like an eerie, echoing drum. Professor McGonagall had gathered everyone who wasn't injured or dead together in the lit entrance hall and had opened up both of the broken front doors in anticipation for the second battle to come.

A white cat stood hidden amongst the ranks gathered in the hall, trying hard not to draw attention to himself. Draco Malfoy knew that his presence wouldn't be well received amongst the students, but he wasn't entirely sure how quickly he wanted to run back to the Dark Lord's side either, since he didn't even have a wand anymore.

As the slightest rays of dawn began to prick at the grounds, a black cloud started to inch over the horizon toward the castle. A grayish mist – no doubt the dementors – swirled off of the encroaching army like smoke, and just behind them loomed the shadow of the five giants. The hungry shrieking and snapping of sixty sets of Acromantula jaws pierced the air.

"Here they come," Neville said lowly from his place next to McGonagall.

He exchanged a determined look with Hannah, who stood to his left.

At last Voldemort came into sight at the front of the procession. He led his Death Eaters with his carved Elder wand aloft over his head, Nagini the snake wrapped up in coils around his shoulders. His scarlet eyes glittered with a horrible, vindictive kind of triumph – the kind appropriate to a bully, and yet applied to the most inhuman of eyes – as he came to a halt at the edge of the courtyard. His black-robed subordinates – Bellatrix, Antonin Dolohov, Etienne Montmercy, Alecko and Amicus Carrow, Narcissa Malfoy, Antony Greengrass, Europa Bulstrode, and the rest – assembled themselves in a straight, military-like line behind him.

"Harry Potter," said Voldemort, his cold, high voice penetrating despite the lack of strain or volume, "is dead."

There was a loud intake of breath within the crowd. Draco felt like he'd been dunked head first into ice-cold water.

"We bring you his body," said Voldemort, "as proof that your *hero* is gone."

The Dark Lord indicated the wide, massive figure standing behind him with his wand.

It was Hagrid. The Hogwarts gamekeeper's bearded face was soaked with blood and tears and he cradled a limp body in his arms – that of a tanned young man with round spectacles and messy jet-black hair.

Everyone was horrified, none more so than Professor McGonagall. Her scream was so awful and full of despair that it was something out of a nightmare.

“NO!”

Hers was not the only terrible scream that slapped the air. Percy, Charlie, and Mr. Weasley had to hold back Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, whose faces were half mad with horror and grief as they tried to run out to Harry's side.

“NO!”

“No!”

“Harry! HARRY!”

Ramsay's fists shook at his sides as Tana grabbed hold of his arm with both of hers. Fleur gave a high, bird-like choke and covered her mouth, clutching at Bill's shirt with her other hand. Professor Sprout brought both of her hands up to her face and shook her head slowly as her eyes flooded with tears.

Draco faltered on his feet, collapsing in a heap as he phased back into his human form, staring at the limp body dangling from Hagrid's arms.

It was over. Potter was dead. The Dark Lord had destroyed him – just like he had so many others, just like Draco *knew* he would –

But Draco had dared let himself hope. He'd *dared* hope that as long as Potter was alive, maybe there'd be a chance the Dark Lord wouldn't win. Maybe the resistance against him would become strong enough that Draco maybe, just *maybe*, might see his father again – that he, his mother, and his father could be together again, as a family –

But Potter's luck had run out. The Dark Lord had won. And now, just like with Dumbledore, the Order of the Phoenix and everyone else in the resistance would fall apart, and everything would crumble...this time for good.

It was over. His weak, pathetic hope of a future for his family...was gone.

Draco's eyes were overtaken by tears of fury and despair and he shut them tight, covering them with his fists as he tried to suppress the pain ripping through him.

"You see?" said Voldemort and he clearly relished every word. "Do you understand now, at last? Harry Potter is dead! He was nothing, ever – nothing but a boy who relied on others to sacrifice themselves for him!"

"He beat you!" bellowed Ron.

There was a rumble from the students and teachers gathered around the entrance hall, who all seemed to have been awoken by Ron's anger.

Draco looked up at their furious faces, startled. His scarlet eyes flaring, Voldemort raised his wand, and with a loud *BANG* and a flash of white light, the crowd suddenly found themselves unable to speak. They had been magically silenced.

"Set the boy down, Hagrid," Voldemort said venomously, "at my feet, where he belongs!"

His large face crumpled up in pain, Hagrid very gently laid Harry's body on the grass, but he seemed unable to leave him alone. He crouched down over him, tears still running down his face and through his messy beard.

"He was killed while trying to sneak out of the castle grounds," said Voldemort, cold satisfaction slithering out of his voice, "killed while trying to save himself – "

“YOU LIAR!”

Neville had miraculously broken loose of the Silencing Charm Voldemort had cast and barreled forward. He blasted a curse at Voldemort’s head, which he easily blocked, before the Dark Lord wordlessly Disarmed Neville and slammed him hard into the ground. The people who had been behind Neville, all suddenly able to speak again too, started shouting angrily.

“That’s a lie!”

“Harry would never – ”

“Don't bullshit us, you – ”

“SILENCE!” cried Voldemort.

With another flash of white light, the crowd was again silenced. Voldemort then shifted his heartless gaze to Neville, his blood red eyes narrowing as he wordlessly bound Neville’s limbs together in a Full Body-Bind.

“Who is this boy who thinks to question the Dark Lord?” he hissed very softly.

Neville glared at Voldemort despite the blood trailing down his forehead.

“My name is Neville Longbottom,” he said, his voice ringing with righteous anger.

“Ah yes,” said Voldemort softly. “I have heard of you from Alecto and Amycus...”

The Carrows sneered hatefully at Neville from behind their master. Nagini the snake slithered off of Voldemort’s shoulders, her massive coils rolling up on the ground: the Dark Lord trailed a long white finger along the top of her head lackadaisically.

“But you are a Pureblood, aren’t you, my brave boy? You show spirit and bravery, and you come from noble stock. You would be a very valuable Death Eater, Neville Longbottom.”

Neville’s brown eyes flared.

“I’ll join you when Hell freezes over,” he spat. “DUMBLEDORE’S ARMY!”

The crowd burst into courageous cheers – Voldemort’s Silencing Charm once again had been broken. Bellatrix and Dolohov both shot forward, blasting the stairs and walls around the students and teachers with several black and violet spells to threaten them back into silence, but Draco could still feel the fiery coals of anger rippling off of the people around him.

Draco didn’t understand. They weren’t giving in. They weren’t standing down. Even if Potter was dead...even if no one else could *possibly* be lucky enough to defeat the Dark Lord...they still fought anyway? They still thought there was hope?

Voldemort considered Neville with a gaze so full of disdain that it rivaled even hatred in its coldness.

“Very well,” he said silkily.

He flourished his wand at the air. One of the castle’s windows smashed open as the ratty, tattered Sorting Hat was catapulted through the air, stopping just short of Neville’s head.

“If that is your choice, Neville Longbottom...on your head be it.”

Voldemort lowered the Hat onto Neville’s head and, with a wave of his wand, set it ablaze.

Neville screamed in pain as the flames overtook him, but the agony only lasted a few seconds. All of a sudden, out of the blue, a blast of water soared like a thin river over the heads of the Death Eaters, putting the Hat and Neville out in one fell swoop.

Everyone whirled around, including Voldemort, whose scarlet eyes widened in fury.

Standing on the hill overlooking the castle courtyard was Horace Slughorn, flanked on either side by Hyperion Carrow and Chaaya Belaji, and his band of reinforcements. The walrus-like man, despite his lack of height, showcased an astounding level of courage as he raised his inky black-and-silver wand high over his head.

“FOR HOGWARTS!” bellowed Slughorn.

The parents and volunteers behind him all charged out onto the field. Then, from the Forest came another wave no one had expected – Hagrid’s half-brother Grawp came roaring through the trees, tearing into the larger giants behind the Death Eaters, as a herd of centaurs came galloping into the courtyard, shooting arrows into the air. Just over them were Buckbeak the hippogriff and the herd of Hogwarts thestrals, their wings spread wide as they glided downward.

It was when these reinforcements arrived that Narcissa Malfoy, her long blond hair cascading behind her like a cape, broke out of the line behind Voldemort and raised her own wand.

“MERLIN’S KIN, ARISE!” she screamed.

Antony Greengrass and Europa Bulstrode, as well as two other witches and three Snatchers, broke out of the horde and shot forward, blasting spells at Voldemort and the other Death Eaters from behind. Voldemort was able to block the assault easily enough, but it took him and his servants visibly off-guard. His heart pounding in his chest with fear and confusion, Draco steadied himself on his feet as best he could and ran forward, straight for his mother.

And then amidst all of the chaos, Neville broke free of the Body Bind Curse Voldemort had cast on him and stumbled to his feet. The Sorting Hat fell off his head, dropping something silver – Neville snatched it up without hesitation, arched it over his shoulder, and brought it down on Voldemort’s snake Nagini.

SHING!

In a clean, scissoring motion, the Sword of Gryffindor cut through Nagini at the neck, slashing the beast’s head off and sending it flying as the headless snake fell limply to the ground.

Voldemort’s mouth opened in a scream of fury that nobody heard over the barrage of sound assaulting the grounds. He shot a burst of a black light from his wand, but Ramsay darted forward,

materializing a weak Shield Charm around Neville that miraculously blocked the Dark Lord's attack.

“GO, NEVILLE!” shouted Ramsay, yanking the young Gryffindor along after him by the arm and then shoving Neville ahead of him, back into the crowd.

Within seconds, chaos broke out. Everyone was shouting, screaming, and casting spells. Chaaya Belaji tore off after Etienne Montmercy, while Europa and Cadoc reunited to take on Macnair. Anthony Goldstein recruited Evander, Terence, Mia, Amos Diggory, and Professor Sprout to help him create a wall of light with their Patronuses around the school, beating the dementors back. The giants ganged up on Grawp and tore him down no matter how hard he fought to keep up. The earth shook as they piled on the smaller giant, punching him and slamming him into the ground.

Noel glanced at the broom in their hand and then up at the giants with a fierce gleam in their hazel eyes. Then they dashed forward, sweeping their broom under them in a fluid motion.

“Noel!” cried Trudy. “Don’t – !”

But Noel didn’t listen. They took off into the air, flying straight at the giants with their wand aloft.

It didn’t take long for the giants to notice the blur of shiny gold and violet fabric buzzing around them. They tried to whack the nuisance out of the sky, but Noel conjured a very long white rope out of their wand and streaked it through the air as they dived and glided, weaving under and around the giants’ arms and legs. At long last, all five giants excluding Grawp were caught in a white web that tangled their limbs together. One lost his balance, and in one violent, swaying movement, he brought the four others down with him when he collapsed to the ground with an earthshaking *BOOM*.

Noel hovered in mid-air, smiling broadly at what they’d wrought. What they didn’t see was that a single dementor had broken away from the others and was now soaring right for them, its rotted hands outstretched –

“*Expecto Patronum!*”

Out of nowhere, a silvery-white greyhound dashed through the air, chasing the dementor back.

Noel looked down, and to their shock, saw Lucius Malfoy removing the hood of his standard Invisibility Cloak so he could be seen, his raised wand still lit with white mist. Standing next to him were Rose, her face flushed with nerves, and Beau, who was grinning in relief.

“If you’re going to pull brainless stunts like that,” Lucius shouted up at Noel, “the least you can do is watch your back!”

Not far away, Hagrid tore through the melee, his voice booming desperately over everything else.

“HARRY? WHERE’S HARRY?”

As he searched for Harry’s missing body, however, the largest of the Acromantula launched itself at him. The half-giant was thrown backward, but he miraculously stayed on his feet, prying open the giant spider’s fanged jaws with both of his massive hands.

“Get – OFF!” he bellowed angrily.

He pushed it off just as fifty more of the eight-legged beasts came scurrying toward him.

Daphne had just reunited with her father Antony when they saw the wave of Acromantula sweeping toward the school. Antony blasted away a few of them with white light from his wand, but he could only stave them off one at a time.

“There are too many of them!” he said, his usually cool, composed voice betraying a growl of frustration.

Daphne’s mind whirled as she cast her eyes around, looking for something that might help. Her dark eyes took in the trimmed hedge bushes scattered around the grounds, the walls of stone – the winged boars guarding the entrance –

Her face brightened as she thought of an idea. Throwing herself forward, she lashed her wand at the hedges.

“Engorgio!”

The hedges swelled up to ten times their normal size: Daphne guided their growth to wind in a line around the courtyard and to arch up into the air.

“Diffindo! Torulo! Anguis Mutatio!”

She trimmed the giant hedges little by little, creating eyes and scales and a large mouth with long fangs –

Within seconds, the hedge had been transformed into a gigantic, life-size recreation of a basilisk, rearing over the courtyard as if it were about to strike.

When the Acromantula saw what looked like their immortal enemy arched over them, they halted abruptly – then, like rats escaping a sinking ship, they scattered in all directions, back into the Forest, toward the Black Lake, or into the mountains.

Hagrid looked up at the basilisk hedge and then at Daphne, his bloody, tear-stained face breaking into a huge grin despite himself.

“Atta girl, Daphne!” he roared, beaming fully.

“DAPHNE!”

Antony, Hagrid, and Daphne all looked up. Running through the courtyard was a very pale, haunted-looking young man with dark bangs and skull-like eyes dressed in torn scarlet Auror robes.

Daphne’s heart leapt.

“RUDOLF! MY RUDOLF!”

She ran to him. The two collided in the center of the courtyard, throwing their arms around each other. Rudolf littered Daphne's face with kisses as he cradled her against his chest.

"My sweet Laurel," he breathed in relief, "oh, how I've missed you – "

The ground shook under them as one of the castle walls came crashing down. Hagrid leapt in front of the young couple, catching one of the fragments with his bare hands and tossing it aside.

"Might want t' kiss and chat later!" he grunted.

Antony ran to Rudolf and Daphne's side, looking perfectly bewildered but nonetheless keeping his wand aloft.

"As much as I'd love to ask questions myself, I must agree with the giant," he said coolly, as he blasted apart another piece of debris with his wand.

When the Death Eaters and the alumni of Hogwarts tore into the school, another ally appeared – the Hogwarts school house elves, led by Harry's elf, Kreacher. Armed with kitchen knives and rolling pins, they whacked and cut at the Death Eaters' ankles with ferocity.

"Fight!" bellowed Kreacher in a bullfrog-like voice. "Fight! Fight for my Master, defender of house elves! Fight the Dark Lord, in the name of brave Regulus!"

"Fight for Dobby!" squeaked Pilo.

"*For Dobby!*" cried the others. "*For Regulus Black! For Harry Potter!*"

On the main staircase, Professor Flitwick fought both Mulciber and Nott single-handedly. Just to the right of the dungeons, Viktor and Fleur fought Avery side by side, while Trudy stood guard over the front door, Stunning Death Eaters one after another when they tried to approach.

The Death Eaters had started to scatter, overwhelmed by the steady build-up of reinforcements.

They clearly had gotten used to being the dominant force – likely *expected* to be so – and they didn't seem to know quite what to do now that they were losing. Many were trying to cut and run, but the army of Hogwarts wasn't giving them a single inch. When Alecto and Amycus tried to bolt, Theia Greengrass and Hyperion Carrow confronted them in the entrance hall.

“Not so fast there, cousins,” said Hyperion coolly.

Alecto's lip curled. “Shouldn't you be with your *books*, Hyperion-yawn?”

“And miss out on kicking your tail?” laughed Hyperion. “Please.”

The Carrows lashed out their wands, blasting the two with black and red curses. Hyperion and Theia dodged them artfully, almost gracefully – not only was it clear that Hyperion had studied Wizard Dueling extensively, but Theia also seemed to have some innate talent for it herself. There was a sharp contrast between the Carrows' mindlessly violent and aggressive attacks and Hyperion and Theia's expert, studied counterattacks.

It didn't take long for Alecto and Amycus to lose their patience. They blasted Killing Curses in every direction, blanketing the floor with green flares.

“*Avada Kedavra!*” screamed Alecto. “*Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra! Avada – !*”

Hyperion blasted Alecto clean off her feet with the force of his Stunning Spell, throwing her to the ground in an unconscious heap.

Amycus roared in fury, barreling forward with his wand alight with green.

“*AVADA – !*”

“*Crucio!*” cried Theia.

Amycus fell to his knees, screaming in agony. Theia overpowered him, lashing his limbs together with a full Body Bind and flattening him to the ground.

“Just like you Death Eaters to be so focused on wanton destruction that you ignore all common sense,” said Hyperion dryly. “‘*Avada Kedavra*’ is one of the longest spells to cast, just judging by the amount of syllables and the complexity of the wand movement. Why waste your time using that when there are so many others you can cast faster?”

Theia walked primly over to Amycus and, her refined face betraying immense hatred, kicked him hard in the side with the pointed toe of her boot.

“*That* is for Daphne,” she spat.

Inside the Great Hall, Voldemort and his most faithful soldiers battled. Ron and Cho lashed out in turns against Rodolphus Lestange, while Tokala and Tana Ramsay took on Rabastian. Hermione, Luna, and Ginny had teamed up to fight Bellatrix. At the center of the room stood the Dark Lord himself, dueling McGonagall, Kingsley, and Slughorn at the same time.

When Draco reached the Hall, his eyes immediately found his mother Narcissa locked in battle with Fenrir Greyback. He dashed over as if to help, only for him to get shoved off his feet and knocked to the floor.

“Where do you think *you’re* going, wittle Draco?” sneered Yaxley.

The hard-faced Death Eater lifted his wand over his head, preparing to attack –

“*Expelliarmus!*”

Yaxley’s wand yanked itself out of his hand. The Death Eater whirled around, his teeth bared, but had no time to react before another nonverbal spell landed and he was tossed backward in sickening spirals.

Neville and Hannah ran forward. When Neville reached Draco, the two regarded each other warily, before Neville extended a hand to him. Draco numbly took it and used the grip to pull himself to his feet.

“What’d you do that for?” muttered Draco.

Neville cocked his eyebrows coolly. “Well, we are supposedly on the same side. Still hate your guts, though.”

Draco’s mouth spread into a large smirk despite himself – the expression made him look much more like his usual arrogant self again.

“The feeling’s mutual, Longbottom.”

A burst of red exploded over their heads; Hannah summoned a Shield Charm around the three of them as Yaxley charged back toward them, blasting spells as he went. Draco stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Neville and Hannah as the two lashed out their own attacks in return.

On the other side of the Hall, Chaaya and Montmercy were in the midst of combat. Montmercy, being the least magically talented of Voldemort’s forces, was struggling – even if Chaaya was not a classically trained duelist like Flitwick, her extensive knowledge of Charms made her a surprisingly credible threat. With a swish of her wand, she levitated Montmercy up to the ceiling, waving her wand in sharp jabs at the air.

“Semperfusione!”

Montmercy’s body slammed against the ceiling, his limbs spread wide.

“GAH!”

He tried to move, his arm twitching as he tried to raise his wand – but it was hopeless. Chaaya had placed a Permanent Sticking Charm on his limbs, affixing him to the stone and making him unable to move.

Chaaya had just lowered her wand, her eyes boring coldly into Montmercy’s face, when Dolohov came up behind her.

BAM!

Chaaya was thrown forward and slammed into the ground. Despite the pain the assault had clearly wrought, Arjuna's mother amazingly was conscious enough to roll across the floor so she could turn around and face Dolohov, even as the Death Eater blasted more violet and black curses at her.

Unlike Montmercy, Dolohov was an expert duelist. Even though Chaaya was a very talented witch, she soon found herself backed into a corner, eclipsed by Dolohov's shadow.

"Looks like you weren't a Squib, after all," Dolohov sneered coldly, his eyes narrowed with malice.

Out of nowhere a young man with a bulbous nose catapulted forward, wrapping one of his arms around Dolohov's neck and putting him in a chokehold.

"No," Beau said righteously, "but *I* am."

Rohan swept to his wife's side, pointing his wand at Dolohov's chest.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The green flare punctured Dolohov's chest, making him choke. Then he slumped forward, dead, amongst the sounds of Montmercy's terrified screams.

Beau dropped Dolohov's corpse and moved over to the Belajis.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," breathed Rohan as he brought his arms around Chaaya. "Thank you."

"The battle's still going on, you know," Chaaya told both men dryly, sliding out of her husband's arms and immediately moving to go help the other combatants.

In the center of the room, just fifty yards from Voldemort, Bellatrix gleefully clashed against Hermione, Luna, and Ginny. As hard as the three girls fought, Bellatrix was just too skilled of a warrior. The Dark Lord's most loyal servant lobbed a swath of flame at Luna, making Hermione leap forward and conjure a Shield Charm around both of them, and then without skipping a beat she shot a flare of green that swiped through Ginny's ginger hair, just barely missing her face.

"NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!"

Mrs. Weasley appeared out of nowhere, throwing her cloak off as she ran. Bellatrix roared with laughter at the sight of the smaller, rounder woman, even as Mrs. Weasley lobbed spells at her.

"No!" Mrs. Weasley cried fiercely when Chaaya and several students tried to help. "Get back! *Get back!* She's mine!"

Bellatrix gave a louder, more exhilarated laugh, dancing around Mrs. Weasley's scarlet curses with apparent ease.

"What will happen to your children after I've killed you?" she taunted. "Poor wittle blood traitors, without their mummy!"

Mrs. Weasley's eyes flared with a kind of rage that better suited a mad lioness. She slashed at the air, streaking violet and yellow curses at the air –

And somehow, amazingly, unbelievably, one of the violet curses streaked in a graceful line across the divide, slipping under Bellatrix's arm, and hit her square in the chest.

Bellatrix's entire rib cage pulsed with a sickening light violet glow as she lurched forward, her eyes bulging. For a split second, she'd realized what happened and her arrogant smile faltered – then she crumpled and fell, landing like a grotesque, misshapen rag doll on the ground.

The defeat of Bellatrix shook everyone in the room to the core. The remaining Death Eaters who were still standing all began to flee for the door as Voldemort roared in fury.

BAM!

In a single gesture, he blasted Kingsley, Slughorn, and McGonagall all off of their feet, thrusting them across the room with the force of a bomb. He swept forward like a menacing shadow, bearing down on Mrs. Weasley as he raised his wand –

“*Protego!*”

A massive Shield Charm appeared out of nowhere, surrounding Mrs. Weasley, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, Kingsley, Slughorn, McGonagall, and everyone else standing in the Hall around Voldemort. No one knew at first where the Shield had come from until a hand appeared out of nothingness, sweeping off a beautiful Invisibility Cloak to reveal its owner.

It was Harry.

The Great Hall burst into screams of shock and cheers of joy, but the sound was quickly stifled when Voldemort raised his wand, pointing it right at Harry’s chest. Harry raised his wand in return, and the two, moving in unison, slowly began to circle each other.

“Stay back,” Harry said loudly, his green eyes flickering to the people over his shoulder. “All of you.”

Voldemort’s blood red eyes were very wide as he stared at Harry with pure loathing.

“Potter doesn’t mean that,” he hissed. “That isn’t how he works, is it? Tell me, who are you going to use as a shield today, Potter?”

“Nobody,” said Harry simply. “We’ll only be able to fight as we are now. Thanks to Neville, Nagini is gone. Because I sacrificed myself, none of your spells will work on my friends. No more Horcruxes – no more deaths. It’s just you and me, Riddle.”

The name was unfamiliar to almost everyone in the crowd, but it made Voldemort’s eyes widen, the slit-like pupils hollow lines of rage.

“You *dare* – ”

“Yes, I dare,” said Harry. His voice was level and utterly fearless. “You’re just a man again, Riddle – or at least, *part* of one. For all the Dark magic you’ve hoarded and all the fear you’ve instilled in everyone...in the end, what’s going to save you?”

Voldemort gave a terrible, high-pitched laugh. Rather than it holding any joy, however, it scraped across everyone’s eardrums and chilled them to the bone.

“You foolish boy! I am the most powerful wizard in the world! I hold the Elder Wand – the Wand of Destiny – in my hand!”

Every set of the eyes in the Hall flew to the wand in Voldemort’s hand.

“Yes, you do,” said Harry lightly. “But holding it in your hand doesn’t make it yours. Even after you killed Severus Snape, the Wand hasn’t worked any better for you, has it? That’s because the Elder Wand answers to someone else, even if you own it.”

The Dark Lord looked from the Elder Wand to up at Harry, his cold white face rippling with hatred.

“You thought Severus Snape was yours,” Harry continued, “but he wasn’t. He stopped being yours as soon as you threatened my mother’s life. He loved her since they were children, and from the moment you targeted her, he fought for Dumbledore. He lied to everyone, did whatever he had to so you would trust him - he even killed Dumbledore on Dumbledore’s own request – all because his love for my mother was stronger than any fear he might have felt for you.”

The pronouncement left the crowd speechless and stunned. Ramsay and McGonagall exchanged a disbelieving look.

“It matters not!” shrieked Voldemort. “It matters not whether Snape was mine or Dumbledore’s, for they are both *dead*! I eliminated both of them, just as I did your *precious* Mudblood mother! And perhaps your pathetic attempt at death has shielded these people from me for the time being, but it offers no such protection to you!”

“Right again,” said Harry calmly. “It doesn’t. But before you try to kill me, Riddle, I hope you think on what you’ve done – find some remorse in your heart, somewhere. It’ll be your last chance, and I’ve seen what you’ll become if you don’t.”

Voldemort's scarlet eyes narrowed to slits, his snake-like pupils flaring. "How *dare* – "

"The Elder Wand's true master is someone in this room, Riddle," Harry cut him off sharply. "He Disarmed Dumbledore long before Snape ever had the chance to, and he's been standing at your side ever since. He's never held the Elder Wand before – probably never even knew it existed before now – but it's answered to him all along, without him even knowing it."

The surrounding combatants all glanced around at each other, looking like they wanted to speak, but being much too scared to. The only people left seemed to be supporting Harry - all of the Death Eaters anyone could see had either been Stunned or otherwise immobilized.

Voldemort's chest rose and fell rapidly as his scarlet eyes bore into Harry.

"If that person is at my side," he said softly, "then he is one of *my* servants! You think that one of my Death Eaters would side with a pathetic little boy like you – a boy who mingles with Muggle scum - who hides at the coattails of every strong wizard he can find?"

Harry paused briefly. Then he smiled slightly, his face illuminated by the reddish glow of the dawn reflected in the enchanted ceiling overhead.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "But none of us expected Snape to side with Dumbledore. And I don't think that person would side with you, Riddle, no matter what threats you throw out or what prizes you might offer. You've always chosen fear over love. Over and over, that's been your biggest mistake. Now that fear is all you have left. Now the only one you can instill fear into...is yourself."

At last Voldemort would hear no more. At the same time both of them raised their wands, pointing it straight at each other's chests.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

"*Expelliarmus!*"

The two spells, emerald green and ruby red, collided in a gigantic explosion. The Great Hall shook,

the surrounding teachers and students latching onto each other to stabilize themselves. The Elder Wand seemed to quake in Voldemort's grip – then the red flare of Harry's Disarming Spell slammed the green Killing Curse backwards, making it catapult back toward its caster –

The merged green and red lights engulfed Voldemort and he froze where he stood, stock-still. He hovered there for a few seconds, before his scarlet eyes rolled up into his head and he fell backwards. The Elder Wand soared up into the air over everyone's heads as the so-called "Dark Lord" landed in a heap on the floor.

Tom Marvolo Riddle died as ordinary and unremarkable a death as any he had delivered to his victims.

The Elder Wand spiraled over several times in mid-air before, as if in slow motion, it began to fall. It was snatched up before it could touch the ground by a pale hand with the expert reflexes of a Seeker.

Draco Malfoy held the Elder Wand over his head, his stormy gray eyes very wide and disbelieving, and he stared at Harry and the assembled army of people, whose eyes were now locked upon him.

The True Master of the Elder Wand

For a long moment, everyone just stared at Draco. Breathing heavily, the young Death Eater slowly lowered the Elder Wand, his grip melding itself onto the handle as he grew comfortable holding it. He held it out in front of him as if it were his original hawthorn wand, his gray eyes losing their surprise and hardening with a little more defiance as he looked down at it to up at the others, his expression almost daring them to talk smack.

Then, all at once, the crowd burst into applause.

Draco looked visibly startled as people shot forward to pat him on the back or shake his hand – some started cheering his name “*MALFOY! MALFOY!*” – still others were just jumping up and down and screaming excitedly – but the elation and relief in response to the fall of Lord Voldemort had overtaken the room.

Draco glanced over at Harry. To his surprise, the Boy Who Lived seemed almost *happy* that Draco was getting so much attention – he’d taken a step back and his posture appeared visibly relaxed. After seeing Harry in the spotlight so much of the time, it was strange to see him so at ease, so *content* – as if he were happy to *not* be the center of attention for once – and it baffled Draco. Harry had done more than he had – sure, he’d been the Master of the Elder Wand, but he never even knew it...

Still, the positive attention was... *cool*.

Draco’s face burst into a big, cocky grin, and for an instant, he looked three years younger. He held the Elder Wand high over his head as if it were the Quidditch Cup the Slytherin team had been denied year after year, and his eyes gleamed with a victorious, arrogant shine.

“I reckon we need something to celebrate with!” he pronounced to the crowd. “What do you say?”

Draco raised the wand high and conjured green and silver fireworks, which exploded loudly over the heads over the spectators. The crowd cheered as the lights filled up the room, rippling over everyone’s faces.

“Draco!”

“Draco!”

Two voices from opposite ends of the hall made Draco still. He looked up, his head darting from one side to the other.

Pushing through the crowd was his mother Narcissa, her long blond hair and high-necked black robes streaming behind her. On the other end by the double doors, tossing aside an Invisibility Cloak as he went, was his father, Lucius, his leather and iron prosthetic limbs making his run a little clunky, but no less harried.

Narcissa’s pale face brightened up just as much as Draco’s at the sight of Lucius, and when both Malfoys met in front of their son, they threw their arms around each other, squeezing tightly as if they never wanted to let each other go again.

“Father!” said Draco. *“Mother...”*

Lucius clung to his wife and son, tears streaming down his pale cheeks. “Draco, my son – *my son* – ”

“We’re so proud of you, Draco,” choked Narcissa.

And it was as his parents enveloped him that Draco, for the very first time, felt a joy beyond any he might have ever imagined before: a joy that seemed to banish the hopeless, endless despair that had haunted him for the last two years – a joy that was stronger than any happy memory he might’ve ever tried conjuring up before. Knowing that his parents were both safe, after he’d wondered for so long if they would be – knowing that they were proud of him, after he’d started to doubt it – knowing that they were together and they would be able to live their lives again, after he’d lost all hope in it happening –

That happiness, born out of the threat of sorrow and failure – that soothing, relieving happiness – this *had* to be what selflessness was made of. This empowering, and yet gentle feeling had to be related to that foreign thing Daphne had described.

“You’ve always chosen fear over love. Over and over that’s been your biggest mistake.”

Love. That was what it’d always been. Not love like the sort Draco felt for his family, but

something similar. It was a *kind* of love that had motivated Ramsay – one less focused, one less...*concrete*. It was the kind of love that emanated off Astoria with every step, every glance, and every word – what made her eyes shine like stars. It was a feeling Draco still didn't quite understand, but seemed to bring new life into his chest, regardless.

“DRACO!”

Out of nowhere, a young woman with a black bob and dark eyes barreled forward – Lucius and Narcissa moved back quickly as she threw her arms around Draco, squeezing tightly.

“P – Pansy – ?” said Draco.

“Draco, thank Merlin you're all right!” she cried, as tears streamed down her face. “I was so worried!”

Draco glanced down at her, his chest twitching with discomfort. It was still bizarre to see Pansy being this overemotional. “...Yeah...yeah, I'm okay – *mmph!*”

Pansy abruptly captured Draco's lips with her own. The move made Draco's whole body prickle awkwardly, and when Pansy tried to deepen the kiss, Draco finally felt enough queasiness and guilt kick in that he couldn't stop himself from yanking himself away.

“What the – what're you *doing?*”

Pansy looked taken aback. “I – I'm happy to see you're all right, of course...”

“Well, be happy *without* kissing me,” snapped Draco.

His voice rang with the same kind of petty, almost childish meanness that it had when he was younger, and the sound made him feel if possible even more ill. His eyes widened and then narrowed again sharply, and he looked away.

Although she had appeared a little hurt by the rejection, Pansy seemed to quickly make up her mind to excuse it. She looked from Draco to down at the Elder Wand.

“Is that *really* the Elder Wand?” she asked softly.

Draco looked at Pansy to down at the wand and gave a slight shrug. “...I guess it is.”

Pansy’s mouth burst out into a large, smug smile.

“Looks like you finally beat Potter,” she said with satisfaction. “I always knew you would.”

Draco’s mouth twitched. Part of him wanted to smile, but it felt almost stupid. He hadn’t beaten Potter at anything - he’d only gotten the Wand by chance, all because he’d tried to kill Dumbledore...

Pansy didn’t seem to see Draco’s discomfort and instead pressed on.

“I’m so proud of you, Draco.”

Draco blinked. “You are?”

“Of course!” said Pansy earnestly. “I mean, sure, the choice wasn’t the *best* one, but you were only protecting yourself – I mean, if the Dark Lord wanted the wand, he would’ve had to kill its true owner, so you only did what you had to do – ”

Draco felt his stomach shriveling up in his chest at the thought of Voldemort facing him, his wand lit with a green Killing Curse, and he shut Pansy down with a little more force than he meant.

“That’s *not* why!”

Pansy looked startled. Draco suddenly felt the eyes of the assembled crowd on him, and it made him feel very uncomfortable. He tried to pull out of her arms, but just as she had in the common room, Pansy held on.

“Draco, what’s wrong?” she asked lowly, soft enough that only they could hear each other.

“Let go, Pansy,” Draco muttered. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Draco, you *won*,” Pansy said under her breath, looking dumbfounded. “You’re safe, I’m safe: your family’s safe. You don’t have to be afraid anymore – everything can go back to normal...”

“Can *you* go back to normal too?” Draco shot back harshly. At once he regretted it, and his face contorted with pain. “Pansy, please – just let go of me.”

But Pansy wouldn’t listen. “You always used to like when I’d hold onto your arm – ”

“Well, I don’t right now,” said Draco gruffly.

“I know you don’t right now, but you will,” said Pansy, her voice very soft but almost fierce in its earnest persistence. “It’s just like I said – you’re still my Draco, even after everything you’ve been through, and I won’t leave you. I’ll stand by you, and one day, you’ll be your happy, old self again.”

Draco’s gray eyes widened upon her face, deepening with a kind of understanding he hadn’t had before.

“...You don’t get it, do you?” he whispered, his voice a fraction of its usual self. “You truly think that everything I said, everything I did, was some *phase*? Something I’d get over?”

The confidence in Pansy’s face flickered. Draco bore down on her, his eyes flashing with an anger he had never felt before.

“I was drafted into the Dark Lord’s service at *sixteen*! I had to see my father writhing in agony as Death’s Head Acid ate off his limbs! The Death Eaters were staying IN MY HOUSE! I saw people getting tortured, killed – I had to watch the Muggle Studies professor get eaten whole by the Dark Lord’s snake!”

Somewhere in the crowd, Ramsay gave a horrified gasp.

“I saw Crabbe get killed by the Fiendfyre he’d summoned himself! And you think, after all that, that I’ll just *get over it*?! That I’ll go back to being that stupid, terrible person I was?”

“You were *not* terrible!” Pansy said fiercely. “You made some mistakes, sure, but they were mistakes *anyone* would make! The boy I fell in love with was never terrible – ”

“That’s the problem, Pansy,” Draco snapped back just as fiercely. “The boy you fell in love with is *dead*. And he is never coming back.”

Pansy stared, her face very pale and her mouth slightly open in shock and dismay. No one spoke: the air was too cold and tense for anyone to even consider speaking. Draco couldn’t look at Pansy – the gleeful, arrogant feeling he’d had holding the wand just a few minutes ago had already curdled in his throat like sour milk.

Lucius, clearly having heard enough, brought a hand onto his son’s shoulder.

“Come, Draco,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Narcissa brought an arm around Draco’s shoulders too and the three parted from the crowd, heading out of the Hall.

On their way, they walked past Astoria, who had been standing in the doorway. As they passed, Draco and Astoria locked eyes. Astoria’s face held no hint of a smile, but her eyes glinted softly, like light bouncing off of delicate light blue pearls. It made the tense knot in Draco’s stomach loosen. Even if he knew he’d been wrong to lose his temper and to hurt Pansy, he knew that Astoria at least didn’t look down on him for it.

Pansy stood alone in the center of the crowd, watching Draco leave as if she’d been set adrift in the open ocean. The assembled people began to drift apart, turning away from Pansy and moving to meet each other. As she stood there, Pansy brought her arms up around herself, squeezing her forearms tightly as if trying to hold herself together.

At last out of the fold came Daphne, leaving Rudolf just behind her. She walked over to Pansy and brought a hand on her shoulder.

Pansy stiffened visibly at the gesture: then she yanked her shoulder out of Daphne's grip, bringing her arms more tightly around herself as she turned away.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing," said Daphne patiently.

She reached out her hand again and Pansy slapped it away.

"I don't need a fake friend like you!" she snapped, her pain making her lash out. "I know you don't want to hang around me anymore than Millicent did, so just *piss off*."

Daphne didn't rise in response to Pansy's temper. Instead she put her hand back on Pansy's shoulder, steering her around so she was facing her, and enveloped her old friend in a hug. Pansy choked, angry and hurt tears streaming down her face.

"Why don't you just run after your baby sister?" she mumbled in a half-hearted attempt at vindictiveness.

Daphne's dark eyes softened.

"Because *you* need me."

Over the next hour, everyone gathered together to mourn the dead and to reunite with their friends. Rose ran up to Ron and practically leapt onto him, dangling from his neck by both arms as they hugged each other tight. Cho likewise embraced Noel, and once Noel introduced Trudy, the two women shared a hug as well.

"Owen spoke so fondly of you all in his letters," said Trudy warmly. "It's so good to finally meet you."

"Likewise," said Cho kindly.

While Daphne sat with Pansy, Rudolf took the time to properly introduce himself to Daphne's family. Astoria and Hyperion welcomed him with open arms nearly at once, and although Antony and Theia seemed a bit more reluctant, they nonetheless gave their blessing to the match.

"If nothing else, you come from a respectable family," sniffed Theia.

Hyperion snorted in amusement. "True – that's certainly more than can be said for us, isn't it, sister dear?"

Theia shot him a quelling look.

In the center of the hall, Europa and Cadoc were sitting on the floor quietly beside Millicent's body. At first they'd made as if to separate her from the line of other bodies, but Europa found that she had too much difficulty trying to touch her lifeless daughter.

Molly Weasley had been sitting with her husband and children a little ways away, but kept glancing over to the two knelt beside Millicent. At long last she finally made up her mind and, exchanging a significant look with Arthur, she broke away from them and walked over to Europa and Cadoc.

"...I'm so sorry."

The Bulstrodes looked up sharply, almost like startled cats. Molly clasped her hands in front of her uncomfortably.

"Your daughter," she said hesitantly, "she saved my sons' lives, out there – Fred and Percy. Several others too. I can't know what it's like to lose a child...but I lost both of my brothers during the First War, and – "

She bit her lip.

"...This whole time, I was terrified – *terrified* that I'd lose my children too. When Bill was attacked – when Ron got poisoned – when George got his ear cut off – when Fred and Percy were fighting – when I almost lost Ginny..."

She swallowed back a sob.

“I d-didn’t know your daughter that well...but she was a brave, brave girl.”

Cadoc and Europa stared at Molly, stunned. Arthur came up beside Molly and took hold of her clasped, trembling hands, squeezing to show some support. Then, after a very long moment, Europa’s gaze drifted down to Millicent’s pale, lifeless face.

“I had no concept that Millicent might be fighting with you,” she said very softly. “We never told her about Merlin’s Kin – about how we were fighting the Dark Lord from the inside. She wouldn’t have been fighting with us in mind. Even if she had, she no doubt would’ve been trying to help the Death Eaters. She never gave Lowry much trouble, and Snape never told us of any misbehavior while she was at school, either. By all accounts she was a quiet, well-behaved child.”

Fred and George exchanged a look. The description of Millicent might have been funny, but it was anything but. All the Bulstrodes had put any weight on was that Millicent hadn’t caused them trouble – Snape probably never mentioned her proclivity toward bullying as Millicent was in his house, and of course when the Carrows were around, Millicent had had to keep her head down.

“You didn’t know any of her friends?” Fred couldn’t help but ask, his tone stained with both disgust and some pity.

Molly shot Fred a reproachful look, but Cadoc merely shook his head.

“We always just let Lowry take care of Millicent’s needs,” he admitted lowly. “Aerope Parkinson would bring Millicent up sometimes, when she was talking about Pansy’s plans, but...well, there was always something else to talk about, and we just...moved on.”

His thin brown eyes were cast down, as if he was ashamed to look anyone in the face, even complete strangers.

“...I don’t know how we’re going to tell Lowry she won’t have to look after Millicent’s schedule anymore,” he said, his words so fragile of a whisper they were almost impossible to hear.

Pity prickling over her features, Molly bent down and brought a comforting hand down on top of Cadoc's.

"We all get caught up in living our lives sometimes," she said very gently. "I'm sure that Millicent knew that you loved her all the same."

Cadoc's lips curled up in a smile that held no joy as he slowly shook his head. Europa brought her arm around Cadoc; she rested her head on his shoulder, and he placed his head on top of hers in return as their eyes both filled up with tears.

"You didn't know our daughter that well, Molly Weasley," Europa said as a ghostly murmur, "but I fear you may have known her better than either of us did, in the end."

While everyone else reconnected in the Great Hall, the Malfoy family sat together on the top of the grand staircase in a small huddle. Draco sat on the stair just over his two parents, rocking the Elder Wand absently between his fingers.

"You seem ill at ease, Draco," said Lucius softly.

Draco swallowed and nodded.

"Is it because of what you said to Pansy?" asked Narcissa gently.

"Yes," said Draco uneasily, "and no..."

He sighed heavily. Then, taking a deep breath, he spoke again.

"It's just – what she said, about the Dark Lord killing me to get the Wand? I hadn't even *thought* of that at the time. I mean, yeah, it's true, I see that, but I hadn't considered it. And when I think on it, I realized *anyone* might try to pull that. I got the Elder Wand just because I *disarmed* Dumbledore – I didn't even need to kill him. Won't that mean that as long as I have this bloody thing, people will be lining up from miles around just to fight me, just to get the Wand?"

Lucius glanced at Narcissa uneasily.

“And that’s not even touching the fact that Pansy thinks I got the Wand because I was just trying to *save myself* – ”

The thought alone made Draco again feel nauseous.

“That *should’ve* been why I did it. It probably *would’ve* been, once. Either that, or I just would’ve stupidly accepted my fate, acting like I was some sort of a martyr to the Dark Lord’s cause – ”

This image, which actually had seemed less likely to Draco, made Narcissa and Lucius both cringe.

“But...she didn’t just *assume* that was why: she thought I’d be right to think it! And I...I can see why it *would* be, if you still believed the Dark Lord was right, but I just...”

He shook his head quickly, brushing aside the end of the sentence and starting over.

“If we’d been with Potter from the start, and you’d gotten hurt, Father...I don’t think Potter would’ve turned his back on us. And I don’t think the Dark Lord would’ve saved you, if we’d been his enemy – not without expecting something in return. If Potter had begged me for help back then, I would’ve gloated: I wouldn’t have *helped* him. Yet Ramsay helped us. And even when everyone thought Potter was dead, they still fought anyway. They weren’t weaker without him – they were *stronger*. When the Dark Lord disappeared, you and the other Death Eaters all fled. When he died...no one mourned him. No one fought for him.”

He closed his eyes tight, swallowing back the lump that had cropped up his throat.

“I can see why Pansy might still think the Dark Lord was right, but I just...I just *don’t*.”

Silence echoed in the hall for a long moment. Then Narcissa took a deep breath, taking hold of Draco’s hand and squeezing it.

“I feel the same.”

Draco opened his eyes to look at his mother. Narcissa had her eyes cast down, looking almost ashamed.

“After what he did to you, Lucius,” she said slowly, “I just couldn’t *bear* the thought of carrying on under his service, even if it was in your name. You supported him with all of your heart, and I understand why – the Mudbloods have been dangerous to us – they’ve hurt you more than anyone...”

Her eyes filled up with pained and angry tears.

“...But I couldn’t fight for the man who forced us apart. I know it’s selfish, but I just couldn’t. The only thing that kept me going was the thought that if the Dark Lord fell, I might see you again – that *Draco* might see you again. I know the cause should’ve been more important...but in the choice between it and you, Lucius...I had to choose you.”

She looked up at Lucius, her expression visibly tense. It was as if, even though she had done what she thought was right and she had been so brave, she was scared that Lucius wouldn’t like how much she had changed in their time apart.

Lucius looked at his wife and son, his stormy gray eyes rather turbulent. Then, his face very white, he swallowed and shakily got to his feet. Once he was standing, he extended both of his prosthetic hands to Draco and Narcissa.

“...Come with me.”

Visibly confused, Narcissa and Draco followed Lucius as he walked down the stairs and led them back toward the Great Hall. Just by the double doors he caught sight of a very tiny brown-haired girl with bright blue eyes and walked over to her.

“Bantling,” he said abruptly.

She looked up, startled. At the sight of Lucius, her face broke into a smile and she bounded up to him.

“Hey, Mr. Malfoy,” she said amiably.

Lucius bit the inside of his lip nervously.

“Bantling, I’d...like you to meet my family. Draco – Narcissa...this is Rose Zeller. She and I were assigned to the same safe house.”

Rose smiled up at Draco and Narcissa, throwing out a hand as if to offer a handshake. “Nice to meet you formally! Mr. Malfoy had nothing but nice things to say about you!”

Both Draco and Narcissa were taken aback. Narcissa looked from Rose’s outstretched hand to Lucius, her mouth slightly open.

“And...*you’re* a...?” she asked weakly.

Lucius nodded, his expression suddenly just as tense as his wife’s had been moments before. Narcissa stared from Lucius to Rose, looking perfectly speechless; Noel, Beau, and Trudy came up beside Rose on either side, their eyes all locked hesitantly on Narcissa and Lucius.

“It’s very nice to meet you at last, Narcissa,” Trudy said kindly.

“We’re glad you’re all right,” added Beau, his voice a little higher in his throat with nerves. “You and Draco, I mean.”

Despite their kind words, Narcissa still looked as lost as a child. Draco and Noel exchanged a look, as if sizing each other up.

“You’re on the Ravenclaw team,” said Draco abruptly.

“Yeah,” said Noel. “And you were on the Slytherin team – at least until you dropped out.”

Rose finally withdrew her outstretched hand, fixing Noel with a wry smile. “Looks like you have *two* things in common, then – you both play Quidditch and you’re both unable to accept a handshake when it’s offered.”

Noel couldn’t stop themselves from snorting with laughter. This humor, miraculously, left a noticeable chink in the tension.

“Were you the one flying around those giants earlier?” Narcissa said slowly as she considered Noel.

“Yeah,” said Noel, startled.

Despite her discomfort, Narcissa couldn’t help but smile slightly. “Managing such tight turns at such a high velocity takes a precise hand. You’re quite a talented young lady.”

Trudy and Beau both opened their mouths to say something, but to everyone’s surprise, Lucius beat them to it.

“Narcissa...Noel is what some people call ‘*non-binary*,’” he muttered in her ear, his proud face scrunched up awkwardly. “I don’t fully understand it, but the...*child* is considered neither a boy nor a girl.”

Noel gawked at Lucius, unable to believe what they were hearing.

“Oh!” said Narcissa, sounding both startled and very confused.

She glanced hesitantly from her husband to Noel and back. Then, despite her unease, she took a deep breath and put on her bravest face and spoke candidly.

“So...what is it that you want to be called?”

Noel stared at Narcissa and Lucius. Trudy brought an arm around the young Ravenclaw, squeezing them lightly to show some support; Noel glanced at Trudy, their hazel eyes sparkling, and then beamed at Narcissa.

“I use they or them pronouns...but just ‘*Noel*’ is fine.”

It took a long while for Dennis to leave Colin’s side. When he did, he decided to leave the Great Hall and go off by himself up to the Owlery. He stood up there for a very long time, looking out onto the now desolate battlefield but barely seeing it, his arms folded over his chest and propping him up on the tower railing.

A few owls hooted and fluttered their feathers at the sound of another person entering the Owlery. Dennis glanced over his shoulder briefly, before he turned away, his arms coming together more tightly.

Kevin, his long-lashed eyes full of sorrow, walked over to Dennis’s side, leaning his arms against the railing too as he looked out. The two stood together in silence, neither seeming to know what to say. When Kevin finally spoke, his voice was very quiet and fragile.

“...I’m...sorry, Dennis.”

Dennis turned his head in the opposite direction, leaning his chin on his arms. Kevin swallowed back the lump in his throat.

“I know that nothing I might do or say could undo what happened. I wish I knew a spell that could.”

The memory of Colin’s flashing camera and similarly bright smile were like a knife in Kevin’s heart.

“...I also know...that as much as Colin felt like a brother to me...he wasn’t my brother. He was yours. And even if I can say I’m here for you, I know what you’re feeling is something I can’t understand.”

The image of Colin and him standing in the snow together beside their incomplete snowman rippled over Kevin’s mind.

“Kevin, I know...that you’re going through something bad. Something really bad, something worse than I could ever know...”

Kevin forced his tears back as he turned to Dennis, his eyes gaining a steely determination despite their pain.

“But even if I can’t know what it’s like,” he said firmly, “I want you to *promise* me that you’ll be okay. I want you to get better and feel better, and I want you to go on. Will you promise me that?”

There was a silence. Dennis kept his face hidden, his arms crossed tightly. Then, at long last, he looked down at the railing, his eyes dry but very haunted, and spoke in a hushed, choked voice.

“...I promise.”

Kevin felt his tears streak down his face. He placed his shoulder against Dennis’s, and the two boys leaned against each other, the silence between them much sadder and yet much less tense than it had been before.

One by one people began to leave the school. Parents returned to their children at home, the Hogsmeade residents returned to their shops, and Tokala, Mia, and Cho bid their British friends goodbye so they could return to their hotel room and contact the MACUSA with news of what had happened.

The Greengrasses were just about to leave the school as well when a white cat appeared at Astoria’s feet, trailing along her ankle.

“Mal – ?” she started, but the cat cut her off with a very loud “*MRROW*” and scampered off down the hall.

Very confused, Astoria darted off after it.

“Astoria?” called Daphne.

“I’ll be right there!”

Astoria followed the white cat out of the entrance hall and down the stairs that led to the Slytherin dungeons.

Once she rounded the corner, she found Draco Malfoy waiting for her. Without skipping a beat, he whipped out the Elder Wand and pointed it right at her.

“*Averte Sactum!*”

Blindsided, Astoria was blasted off her feet. She landed with a painful thud on the floor, her light blue eyes very wide.

“Malfoy, what are you *doing?*”

But he didn’t answer her. Instead he merely continued to blast more blue and white spells over her head.

“Malfoy, *stop!*”

She ducked the spells, darting across the hall as she yanked out her own wand.

“*Expelliarmus!*”

Her scarlet spell collided with his hand, flinging the Elder Wand out of his grip.

“What are you playing at!?” Astoria demanded shakily, still holding her wand high.

Draco had stiffened when his wand was ripped out of his hand, but almost instantly, his shoulders

seemed to visibly relax and his face broke out into a small, but still familiarly arrogant smile.

“Sorry,” he said, “but I had to make sure...”

“Make sure of what?” asked Astoria, looking very irritated about how confused she was.

Draco held both of his hands out, his fingers splayed open.

“Because I Disarmed Dumbledore, I became Master of the Elder Wand. I became the true owner of the most powerful wand on Earth completely by accident.”

He strolled over and picked the Elder Wand up off the floor.

“But I know that there are plenty of people who might want to take that same wand on purpose, whether by simply challenging me to a duel or forcing me into it. I could feign class with a lot of the challenges, but I know myself well enough that I know I couldn’t ignore *all* of them. I might be sick of fighting, but I’m not stupid: I know I’ve got a temper. Potter can *still* get a rise out of me, even now. So if people want to think of me as the most powerful wizard on Earth – the ‘*Master of the Elder Wand*’ – fine. I could get used to that title. Let them call me that. But even if they somehow managed to win against me, I have no intention of letting them own the Wand – not if the Dark Lord was able to hold his own against three opponents even when the Wand *didn’t* answer to him.”

He rocked the Elder Wand between his hands.

“I can’t let anyone else own the Elder Wand...but I know that if I stay its Master, I’ll be fighting for the rest of my life – and sooner or later, I will lose. And if I lose, so will everyone else.”

Astoria stared as Draco walked up to her. He took her hand, gently pried open her fingers, and slid the Wand into her hand, holding her hand and the Wand in both of his.

“But now, even if I hold the Wand in my hand, it’s not mine. It’s *yours*. So even if I do lose, the Wand’s allegiance will not shift. And once the Master of the Elder Wand dies of old age in her bed, unchallenged and undefeated...well, who knows? Maybe the Wand’s magic will finally die too.”

Astoria's light blue eyes were very wide.

"But..." she stammered, "but...why would you give it to *me*?"

"Three reasons. One: you're a pacifist. Even now when you didn't know what was in my head, you tried to not fight me at first. Two: even if you don't like me, you don't hate me enough to let me get hurt, but you wouldn't make it easy for me to fight either. Three..."

Draco's stormy gray eyes softened even though his face remained rather stony.

"...You're a stronger person than I could ever be."

Astoria considered Draco, her light blue eyes trailing over his pale, pointed face. Then her lips curled up in a smile.

"You're stronger than you think, Malfoy," she said. "Not everyone is given the power of a god and decides not to keep it."

She slid the Elder Wand back into Draco's hand, her fingers lingering beside his. Draco moved forward slightly, looking like he wanted to bridge the gap, but at the last moment changed his mind, returning to where he was.

"Astoria?"

The use of her first name startled her. "Hmm?"

"If I sent you an owl," Draco said with a smirk, "would you burn the letter right away, or might you read it first?"

Astoria laughed. "I'd read it."

Once Lucius had left with Narcissa and Draco, Beau escorted Trudy, Noel, and Rose back towards Hogsmeade.

“We might be able to take the Floo Network back now,” Beau said optimistically. “Hopefully now that everything’s settled, the Ministry will have fixed the Network so we can travel freely...”

Noel slowed their walk, their hazel eyes running over the shop signs overhead. Noticing this, Rose backtracked slightly, moving to walk alongside them.

“Noel?” she said softly. “Are you okay?”

Noel looked up, a little startled, and then put on their best smile. “Oh, sure, it’s just...now that the War is over, I reckon things are going to go back to normal...aren’t they?”

“I suppose so,” said Rose, sounding a little confused.

Noel exhaled through their nose.

“I know it sounds dumb, but...I kind of wish it wasn’t. Sure, it’s been scary all the way along...but when I was trapped with you all, at Beau’s house, I felt almost...well, like I *fit* somewhere. Maybe it was uncomfortable, and maybe Lucius was a prat, and maybe I wanted to go outside more...but I didn’t *bother* you. It felt nice, not to be a bother to someone...”

Rose’s eyes rippled with sadness, but before she could say anything, Beau and Trudy both turned to face Noel.

“Noel, you’re not going back,” said Beau with a gentle smile.

Trudy nodded firmly. “As soon as we get back to Beau’s house, I’m going to submit the adoption application I wrote for you to your case worker.”

Noel gave a start. Trudy’s face broke out into a smile too.

“I mean, I’m not getting any younger, but...I already lost my husband, and then this War took my daughter and grandson too. To return to that empty house alone, especially while knowing that a sweet child like you has even *less* to go back to...well, it’s *wrong*. I doubt a crotchety old lady like me is really what you had in mind, but – ”

Trudy was interrupted by Noel abruptly running forward and throwing both of their arms around her.

“Thank you, Trudy!” they cried, their voice exhilarated beyond belief. “Thank you, *thank you!*”

Her face softening visibly, Trudy brought a hand through Noel’s short hair affectionately.

The Spark

Over the course of the next two days, St. Mungo's became a gathering place for wizards and witches to reunite with their missing loved ones. All those who had been injured while in hiding, as well as the ex-prisoners of Azkaban and the Saeva Ward, were brought to the magical hospital, forcing the Healers to magically expand all of the wards to make room for the hundreds of new patients. The Muggles that Jengu and his Guilder associates had kidnapped had also been brought to a special ward on the ground floor where their memories could be carefully edited, so as to undo the horrible trauma they had undergone. The only exception was Elijah Whitby, since he'd been married to a witch and so had already known about the Wizarding World before being kidnapped.

"I wish that the Wizarding World didn't have to cover everything up," murmured Elijah as he and George Ketteridge left the room. "I know what they've all gone through, I know it was horrifying, but is it really right to rewrite all of their memories with lies?"

Ketteridge sighed sadly. "I don't know. But it's the only choice open to the Ministry of Magic, given the Statute of Secrecy. Unless we want all of those Muggles to either expose the existence of our world to everyone, or never be able to function in polite society again, there's really no other option."

Elijah frowned. He was an officer of the law himself, but he found himself at odds with the injustice of the situation. Rather than giving the Muggles any justice for what had been done to them, it felt as though the Wizarding World deemed it better to simply erase the damage and pretend it didn't happen. The Ministry of Magic could have prosecuted Adrian Enrouge and Jacques Jengu for their role in the affair, but it seemed that after Enrouge's descent into madness after being unjustly imprisoned by the Death Eaters and Jengu's sincere effort to free everyone locked up in Azkaban, no one had the stomach for it. Imprisoning Montmercy, the Carrows, and the other Death Eaters, or even their accomplices like Umbridge or Uric Cuffe, had been one thing, but punishing the Guilders after how much they'd already suffered seemed needlessly cruel.

At that moment the Madame Healer of St. Mungo's, Augusta Feverfew, approached the two men. Although she wore the same lime green robes and matching headscarf that she always wore, she looked noticeably thinner and paler than she had before the War.

"Mr. Ketteridge," she said kindly, "Your stepdaughter Rose just checked in at the front desk with some of her friends."

Ketteridge's round, blond-bearded face seemed to blanch and brighten at the same time, his expression torn between anxiety and relief.

“Thank you,” he said very quickly.

He plodded down the hall past her, Elijah at his heels. Within moments they’d rounded the corner and opened the door that led into the waiting room.

The space was stuffed to the brim with people, all of whom presumably waiting for news of their loved ones recuperating in the different wards. Several couples were whispering amongst themselves; one wizard had buried his face into his husband’s shoulder, unable to stop himself from breaking down into tears.

Huddled in the center of the room was a group of younger witches and wizards, sitting on the floor together. The first face among them that Elijah recognized was Harry Potter – even through his messy jet-black hair, his lightning bolt scar was quite visible. Next to him were a few other faces Elijah recognized from the pictures Kevin had shown him – Ron Weasley, Daphne and Astoria Greengrass, Cho Chang, and Hannah Abbott. Ron sat next to Harry, his arm wrapped around a girl with a mane of very curly hair. Hannah sat next to a round-faced boy who was holding her hand tightly, while Daphne sat comfortably in the lap of a young man with rather unattractive sunken-in eyes. When Elijah and Ketteridge came around and got a little closer, they could see the four smaller figures on the other side of the circle that the taller people’s heights had obscured – two boys, one very small with mousy brown hair and the other with long-lashed eyes and messy curls, a short girl with pudgy cheeks and brown pigtails, and a fourth child of no discernible gender with short hair and pink lips.

“*Rose!*” cried Ketteridge.

Rose’s head shot around. At the sight of Ketteridge, her face lit up, making it resemble a sunbeam.

“George!”

She stumbled to her feet. Ketteridge practically threw himself across the room, and the two met in the middle, the tall, pudgy man grabbing hold of Rose’s tiny frame and enveloping her in a huge hug.

“Oh, Rose, thank *Merlin*,” he mumbled as he hugged her tightly.

“George, it’s *so* good to see you!” said Rose. She pulled away just enough to look at him and couldn’t bite back a grin. “...You’ve grown a beard!”

Ketteridge couldn't help but laugh. "Yes...yes, I suppose I have."

Rose glanced behind him, her blue eyes excited. "Where's Mum? Is she here too?"

Ketteridge's relief seemed to flicker and die. His expression darkened, and he looked down at his hands, his eyes slowly filling up with tears.

Rose's smile faded at once, the hope giving way to concern. "...George?"

Ketteridge swallowed, his eyes glistening with tears, before he finally forced himself to look back up at Rose's face.

"I'm sorry, Rose," he said very softly. "I'm afraid she's not."

Rose's blue eyes searched Ketteridge's expression, widening a little more every second as her stepfather's meaning became plain. After a long minute, the little Hufflepuff's eyes slowly shrank back to their normal size and filled up with tears too. Closing her eyes as the tears trickled down her cheeks, she brought her small head down on Ketteridge's shoulder and silently cried.

Rose's friends watched her and Ketteridge hold each other tightly as they grieved, their faces full of sorrow and empathy. Dennis and Kevin exchanged a look as the man behind George Ketteridge took a step forward.

"...Kevin?" he whispered.

Kevin looked up, startled.

The stranger standing before him had a haunted, hollowed-out face, but it nonetheless held a surprising amount of warmth. His dark hair was a little overgrown and shaggy and his olive green eyes seemed to hold a million emotions at once. It was the eyes that caught Kevin's attention, for he thought he'd seen them somewhere before...in one of those pictures he'd pasted into his scrapbook, when he'd written to his friends about a mother and father he didn't remember...

Kevin's long-lashed eyes widened slowly upon the stranger's face. Very abruptly, he shot to his feet, staring at the man openly.

"Are you – " he stammered, "are you my – ?"

Elijah's eyes flooded with tears as he ran forward, throwing both of his arms around Kevin. The feeling was like nothing Kevin had ever known – it was like being wrapped up in a wonderful, warm blanket, except it felt custom-made for Kevin, like it was *meant* for him – like that embrace had only ever belonged to him, and no one else in the entire world –

Tears overwhelmed Kevin's vision.

This was his father. He really *did* have a father!

Tears streamed down his face as he grabbed onto Elijah, sobbing openly into his shirt.

"Dad! *Dad!*"

Up in the Mungo Bonham Ward on the fourth floor, things were pretty quiet. Like all of the others, it was full of patients: although in the past this room had only held twenty patients at most, right now it was holding forty, and there was very little room between the beds for the Healers to reach each patient. Most of the patients had drawn the long lime green curtains around their beds so they could rest. The only two that were up were longhaired Weird Sister Donaghan Tremlett and Bridget Jaheem, who sat up in bed to talk to each other.

"Surprised dey couldn't just heal yer legs up nice and smartly," said Tremlett. "I mean, it's not like dey're like tose Saeva Ward buggers, not *wantin'* t' help..."

"They're better than they were," said Bridget. "Breaking a limb isn't a big deal, yeah, but they said that the lack of treatment resulted in a compound fracture, and a lot of bone fragments were lost when the pieces broke through the skin...so they'll have to re-grow my bones and then transfigure them back into my legs."

Tremlett grimaced. “Charming.”

Bridget attempted a weak smile.

“The Healers said I’ll be able to walk again,” she said more solemnly, “but they said it might hurt for a while. They also said I’d probably be less flexible than before...so I suppose I won’t be able to dance anymore.”

Tremlett’s face softened. He reached out a grizzled, tattooed hand and took hold of Bridget’s.

“Hey, now,” he said, “don’t let your face fall dat far. Sure, it might be a bit harder, I wager, but if I’m not mistaken, I’m talkin’ t’ de lass who time an’ again kept lookin’ at de cage she was stuck in and said, ‘*Nah, bollocks to dis.*’”

Bridget looked up at Tremlett as his messily bearded face broke out into a huge smile.

“You won’t dance again if you don’t try, lassie. And don’t forget, you’ll have yer mum and yer friends all behind you. If you can survive the Hell *we* went through, den I wager someday you’ll be tap-dancin’ across a bloody stage.”

Bridget’s mouth curled up in a large white smile and she squeezed Tremlett’s hand back.

“Thanks, Donaghan.”

“**BRIDGET!**”

Startled, the young Slytherin looked up.

In the doorframe, standing just behind a lime-dressed Healer, were her friends. Pretty, dark-haired Cho – curly-haired, long-lashed Kevin – smiling, bright-eyed Astoria – tiny, pigtailed Rose – gorgeous Daphne with her full red lips – golden-haired, beaming Hannah – and at the front, running forward toward her, his blue eyes blazing with relief and tears –

“*RON!*” Bridget cried at the top of her lungs.

She struggled to try to shift herself around in bed, just barely managing to place herself in a seated position with her legs off the edge by the time Ron reached her. They grabbed hold of each other, squeezing with all of their might as happy tears streamed down their faces.

“I thought I’d never see you again – ” choked Ron.

“So did I!” Bridget wheezed in return. She closed her eyes and buried her face into Ron’s shoulder. “Every day I just hoped beyond hope that you all were still alive – that I’d be able to get out and find you – ”

“We all thought you were dead,” mumbled Ron. “If I’d known where you were sooner, I swear we would’ve – ”

“I know,” said Bridget, smiling more fully. “I know you would’ve. I’m just glad Daphne has such good taste in men!”

She chuckled through her tears as she smiled up at Daphne. The elder Greengrass, her dark eyes also full of tears, ran forward to hug Bridget as well, bringing a hand up behind her head and cradling it gently. The others also came up in turns to hug Bridget, sharing news and sharing in each other’s relief and joy at being reunited.

The next day, Tokala, Mia, and Cho left Britain with a complete report on the events of the last few days in hand. Kingsley Shacklebolt, the acting Minister of Magic, had seen them off at the Muggle airport himself, passing along a letter of high regard to the President and Vice President of the MACUSA.

Cho had been very happy to land in New York. Even though it’d been nice to see her friends again, Britain just no longer held the same warmth that Cho had once associated with it. That happiness had been muddled slightly, however, when she reached her family’s apartment. Her father greeted her with a large hug and her mother immediately got to work on dinner, and at first it seemed like everything was normal. But once her parents started asking her about how her trip went, Cho found herself growing uneasy.

“For everything to go so badly, while you were there on business!” said Mrs. Chang. “You *did* stay out of harm’s way, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” said Cho at once, though she felt uncomfortable at it. “At least, as much as I could – I still had to try to help – ”

“Help *nothing*,” said Mr. Chang lowly. “You’re not an Auror, Cho – you could’ve been *killed*. All we can do is thank Merlin you’re all right...”

Cho knew her parents weren’t trying to be unhelpful, but it only served to remind her of how many secrets she was still keeping. She hadn’t gone with an envoy from the Department of Magical Games and Sports – she’d gone as part of the Undercover Magical Agents. She hadn’t gone to try to get the Quidditch World Cup up and running again – she’d gone to help her friends. She hadn’t stayed out of harm’s way – she’d run right onto the battlefield at Hogwarts. And on that very battlefield, she’d lost friends that she never thought she’d lose – friends that she should’ve been able to save –

That night she sneaked out of her apartment, staying quiet enough that her parents couldn’t hear her, and settled herself on the stairs leading down to the lower level. She brought her arms around her knees tightly, gazing at the shadowy emptiness below but barely seeing it.

Colin had saved her life, only to lose his. Millicent had died while saving Lavender Brown. Not to mention Arjuna had died trying to save Eddie, Roger, and Julien, and Owen had died trying to save his mother...even Cedric, when he died, had been trying to protect himself and Harry in the graveyard. All of their faces glided over Cho’s memory, rippling within the tears that swam over her eyes and trickled down her cheeks and nose as she bowed her head and her black hair came down like a long curtain around her face.

An apartment door opened, but Cho didn’t hear it: she was too lost in her tears. After a moment, she felt someone sit down beside her, faintly brushing up against her arm.

Blinking up through her tears, Cho looked up. Sitting beside her, her solemn brown eyes gazing straight ahead rather than at her, was a petite blond-haired girl with a classically beautiful face.

“Amanda?” mumbled Cho, disbelieving.

“Hi,” said Amanda quietly.

She didn’t turn to look at Cho. Her gaze remained straight ahead at the blackened stairwell beyond – her face looked faintly uncomfortable, but she kept her posture very straight, as if she were determined not to shrink.

“I got your letter,” she said after a long moment.

Cho sniffed, wiping one of her eyes on her sleeve.

“...You did?”

“Yeah,” said Amanda.

Her brown eyes narrowed upon the hallway.

“I wouldn’t have, if I hadn’t come back. I wasn’t gonna, at first. When I left, I went home with no plan. Kinda stupid, really – almost missed the show’s premiere...”

She took a deep breath.

“...But I just...I just *had* t’ go home. After what I saw – what you said...I was scared. So I went home and visited my grandma. She used t’ go off the rails sometimes, ya see – rantin’ about real-life witches and their ‘*grand conspiracy*’ t’ tear down our country...”

An amused smile had wound its way onto her features as she said this, but within seconds it had faded, as if it had been only a shadow.

“We always made fun o’ her because o’ that,” she said quietly. “All of us did. *I* did. So when I went t’ see her, I thought I’d tell her everythin’ – tell her that I should’ve believed her, that I shouldn’t have been so terrible. But then, when I was there...”

She swallowed, her brown eyes quaking slightly despite their strength.

“I told her I was sorry, and the very first thing outta her mouth was, ‘*you saw one, didn’t ya? A witch?*’ She looked so *excited*. I hadn’t really known what t’ say, so she went on, ravin’ about how she knew one day we’d all see the truth, that we’d all see how dangerous y’all are – not in those *exact* words, but that was basically it. And I don’t know...but her usin’ the word ‘*evil*’ just bothered me. Every time she used it, I thought o’ you...and it just didn’t fit.”

Cho stared at Amanda, her teary eyes widening. Amanda’s face broke a very weak, almost nervous smile, even as she bowed her head and looked down at her feet.

“And in the end...I couldn’t tell her ‘bout you. Because even if you *are* a witch, and even if I am really scared...you’re my friend...and I should’ve remembered that before I went stormin’ off without a word. ”

Amanda looked up at Cho at last, her face turning much more reproachful.

“Then I came home and found that *letter* of yours under my door, sayin’ you were goin’ back t’ the country your family left because it was *dangerous!*” she finished impatiently. “What the hell kind of goodbye would *that* have been, if you hadn’t come home? Did you give Lalo one o’ those too, or was I lucky in that?”

Cho couldn’t completely bite back an uncomfortable, tear-soaked laugh. She began to sob again, tears streaming down her face. Looking a little more concerned, Amanda brought an arm around Cho and held her against her side.

“Did the... ‘*MACUSA*’ fix everythin’?” Amanda asked uncertainly.

“The W-War is over,” Cho said through quiet sobs. “The Death Eaters’ leader is dead...and the British Ministry is free again...”

“But?” said Amanda.

“But so many *died*! So many were lost – mothers, fathers – sons, daughters. Friends. Family. And many of them were so young...”

Cho sniffed loudly, wiping some of her tears away on her sleeve.

“I know that it can’t be the end of it. The Death Eaters were in Britain and now they’re gone – but there are already sorts like them here, in the States. You *saw* them. How many more like those *are* there? How many more families will they destroy? Will it all just keep happening over and over again?”

Amanda watched Cho cry, her brown eyes becoming smaller as she considered her answer. When she finally spoke, it was oddly brusque.

“I can’t speak fo’ witches and wizards...but I think you’re right that this stuff won’t stop jus’ because those British ‘*Eaters*’ are gone. Hate feeds on itself – you can’t stamp it out that easily. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try. I mean...just look at you and me. My grandmother *hates* witches and wizards. I don’t. And that’s ‘cause I met you. I might’ve gone along with Grandma’s logic, if I hadn’t become your friend, and learned from you, and heard your story. So it seems t’ me that the best way t’ stamp out hate is by teachin’.”

Cho’s eyes softened upon Amanda, making her face visibly warmer despite the ongoing flood of her tears.

“Story...”

A flood of memories rushed over her mind. Colin dumping pancake batter on top of the four judges during the MagicChef contest – Millicent remaining at the Slytherin table while everyone else filed out – Madame Hooch blowing on her whistle as she soared over the goal hoops – Remus Lupin smiling as he answered a student’s question next to the blackboard – Tonks blasting spells at Antonin Dolohov to protect Terry – Owen writing the Cooking Club’s condolence letter to Hannah – Arjuna tossing her loose black braid over her shoulder – Eddie Carmichael setting off noisemakers in the Ravenclaw commonroom – Roger Davies dancing with Fleur Delacour at the Yule Ball – Cedric and her huddled under a table at a Ministry party when they were children, giggling and chatting about Quidditch...

All of them – all of those who had died, as well as those who had lived, had all had their own stories. Each one was made of a thousand moments – dozens of smiles, dozens of tears, dozens of laughs, dozens of failures, and dozens of successes – and all of them, whether they lived or not, had expected for those stories to go on. For quite a few, their stories were cut short, but that didn’t mean those stories lost their value. Every memory that emerged from Cho’s mind had made her heart ache, but it also made her happy to remember them. The alternative was to forget them entirely – at which point those experiences and memories had no use at all. But as stories – as stories that could be passed on – those memories had a power that could in turn touch others...and maybe change the course of other people’s lives for the better.

Very slowly, Cho brought her hands up to her face, sliding them along her eyelids and across her cheeks to wipe away the rest of her tears. She blinked up at Amanda, her puffy red eyes nonetheless much more determined than they were before.

“Thank you, Amanda,” she said softly.

She hugged her blond-haired friend close, and Amanda brought a hand gently up on the back of Cho’s head, smiling slightly.

“It’ll be okay,” she assured her. “You’ll see.”

Back in Britain, Harry bid Kreacher goodbye, stepped out of 12 Grimmauld Place (now once again secure, thanks to the protective enchantments Arthur Weasley had helped him install), and Disapparated into the night.

He arrived at a house he’d only seen once, the night he’d finally left the Dursleys’ house on Privet Drive. Feeling an unpleasant chill down his spine, he walked through the garden that he and Hagrid had crashed into so long ago and up to the front door. Swallowing back the lump in his throat, he reached out a cautious hand and knocked on the front door.

After a long minute, the door opened. Just inside was a forebodingly beautiful woman with a face that was strikingly similar to that of her older sister, Bellatrix Lestrange, but was framed by soft brown curls and decked with wider, kinder brown eyes.

“Hello,” Harry greeted lowly.

At the sight of him, Andromeda Tonks sighed quietly. “Hello, Potter.”

The two stared at each other for a long moment, not quite sure what to say. Guilt rippled over Harry’s features.

“I’m so sorry – ” he started.

“Hush,” Andromeda cut him off a little too harshly. Her face, however, was full of pity as she took a step back from the door and extended a hand. “Come inside.”

Trying hard not to show the discomfort still prickling at the back of his neck, Harry silently obeyed, stepping over the threshold into the hall.

He hadn’t had the chance to appreciate the Tonks home the last time he was here. For such a small place, it really looked quite comfortable, with every room painted a different color and beautiful wooden art pieces mounted to the walls, including a star inside a circular shield and a massive tree with hundreds of intricately chiseled leaves. The white-painted banister on the staircase had been carved into the shape of a seal with cascading waves flowing off of it, and each of the rods coming off of the banister were carved into lines of tiny, swirling bubbles.

“Ted’s hobby,” said Andromeda when she noticed Harry’s interest. “All done *without* magic, may I add.”

“He *made* all this?” asked Harry, impressed.

“Every last one,” said Andromeda, sounding very proud.

She started up the stairs. Harry followed along behind her, trailing his fingers gently along the ocean-wave banister while being careful not to lean too much on it.

When they reached the landing, Andromeda headed to the right into a smaller room painted a cheery light yellow. She moved to the crib set up by the window under the hand-carved teddy bear mounted on the wall, leaning over the edge of the railing and picking up a bundle of blankets that had been inside. When Andromeda picked the bundle up, it immediately started to gurgle.

Harry had decided that he *needed* to come here, after what had happened to Lupin and Tonks. Lupin had asked Harry to be his son’s godfather, just like Sirius had been Harry’s. But now that he was here, just three feet away from Lupin’s son, Harry suddenly felt scared and unsure, like he was stuck back in the frozen lake outside the Forest of Dean.

Seeing the conflicting emotions in his face, Andromeda looked at him with a sad smile.

“Come here, Potter,” she said.

She brought her arms down just enough that he could see the baby’s face. Harry caught sight of some small turquoise blue tufts of hair. Feeling apprehensive beyond belief, he slowly took a step forward and looked down upon the tiny child.

Teddy Lupin was just as bright-eyed as he’d been in the picture Lupin had shown them. Those eyes at present were an unnatural pink as they drifted absently over the adults’ faces and then up at the ceiling just over them. His face, although so little and pudgy, was heart-shaped like his mother’s. The shape of his eyes and nose, although still so small, were just like his father’s.

Harry stared down at the little baby, almost awed despite himself. He’d never really been around small children, given that he was an only child and the only other kid he’d grown up alongside was Dudley, so even if he knew logically that babies were small, he’d really had no idea just how tiny Teddy really was until he was right there in front of him. And yet despite being so small, his eyes were so big and so bright.

But of course they were, Harry thought – he had no idea what had happened to his parents, or how terrible his life was going to be without them...

“Here,” said Andromeda. “Take him.”

Terror seemed to clench Harry’s throat. “*What* – wait, no – !”

His hands fumbled frantically as he tried to take Teddy from her, not knowing quite where to hold him or how.

“Mind his head,” cautioned Andromeda.

Harry very quickly brought his wrist under Teddy’s head while still fumbling to figure out how best to hold the rest of him with his other arm. He leaned the baby up against his shoulder, hoisting him up onto his forearm. For a second he felt like he was holding Hedwig again, but Lupin’s son was much heavier: at least, much heavier than Harry had expected.

Teddy blinked up at Harry, his eyes very wide and interested. He stared up at his pale, terrified-looking godfather, taking in the askew round glasses and blinking twice.

Then the baby's pudgy, heart-shaped face burst into a smile and his little eyes squinted, the pupils flashing a green identical to Harry's, as he gave a sharp, hiccup-like laugh.

All at once, Harry felt all of his terror and shame melting away. He tried to steady his breath, and the little gasps for air he took fell like weak chokes of laughter from his lips as he stared down at the laughing infant propped up in his arms.

Even through all of the grief he'd felt after Lupin and Tonks's deaths and all the guilt he'd felt about Snape's, Harry had tried very hard not to let those feelings show, but they had still lingered in his heart like an unpleasant shadow. But all of a sudden, in a single instant, those shadows had been beaten back by a tiny blaze of sunlight. That spark was somehow strong enough to drive all of those clouds away.

Teddy *wouldn't* know how terrible his life was without his parents, Harry decided in that moment – because Harry wouldn't let Teddy live the life he'd had: a life without a loving family who supported him and told him every day how special and important he was.

Harry looked up at Andromeda, his green eyes suddenly full of tears, and smiled.

"I have an interview with the Auror Department tomorrow," he said shakily, "but is it okay if I visit again, tomorrow evening?"

Andromeda gave him a dewy smile. "Yes – but only if you agree to watch him Saturday afternoon while I do some shopping."

Epilogue

Spring had been unusually cold and rainy that year. Even on this particular day, when the rain had stopped and the sun began to peek out from behind the clouds in earnest, the misty chill still clung to the air.

With a *CRACK*, Ron Weasley appeared in the center of the murky green street of Wandsworth Green, bounding up the road with a spring in his long strides. He was dressed in trainers, jeans, and casual plaid robes, his beard faintly scruffy and his sleeves rolled up messily. The tentacle-like scars he'd gotten from the brains in the Department of Mysteries and the ribbon-like one around his right arm that he'd gotten from being Splinched were both visible, but they were very faded now – neither of them had hurt him in the last twenty years. He'd gained some weight too, but Ron had been hoping that once his son Hugo made it to Hogwarts too, he could use the extra time he'd have during the school year to get back in shape.

After a brisk walk, he finally reached the restaurant decked with enchanted, multicolored flames and neon lights called Hell's Kitchen. With a grin, Ron pushed open the door and headed inside. The girl standing behind the podium, who wore her hair in a pretty blond pixie cut, smiled slightly as he entered.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Weasley," she greeted him.

"Ron, please," said the ginger-haired wizard with a grin. "I'm here for the table of eight – I guess it'd be under the name Kransimir?"

"Yes, sir," said the girl politely. "Right this way."

The blonde escorted Ron to a table in the center of the dining hall, just to the right of the kitchen doors. Sitting around the table were seven others.

On the short end on the left side of the table was Daphne Kransimir, forebodingly gorgeous as ever. She'd dressed to the nines in light blue dress robes that showed off her shoulders and she'd styled her brown hair in flawless, Hollywood-worthy curls. Sitting directly beside her was her sister Astoria Malfoy. Her hair was shorter than Ron remembered, ending in a sweet, neat flourish around her chin, and she wore noticeably more casual gray and white robes with a black beret and a pair of pretty purple wool gloves.

On Astoria's other side was Kevin Polson-Whitby, his face bright with his usual cheerful smile. Out of everyone, he'd grown the most – gone was the lank, skinny frame of his youth, and in its place was that of a strong, handsomely tanned Auror with a beautifully carved cherrywood right hand. Despite this, though, his clean-cut face was still boyish and kind, and his scarlet Auror robes were modestly unbuttoned to reveal the black Lady Gaga T-shirt and jeans underneath.

Across the table was Hannah Longbottom, chatting away with Rose Zeller. Hannah had changed the least out of everyone: even after so many years, her laughter was golden as her hair, and the sweet flower-printed green robes she wore only served to make her glow brighter. Rose, on the other hand, looked almost wild. She'd dyed her long hair a light cotton candy pink, and she'd partnered it with a baby blue raincoat over a lavender skater dress, black leggings, shiny unicorn-horn-shaped earrings, and bright yellow rain-boots.

Beside Rose was Cho Galvez, who looked more sophisticated in comparison. She'd cut her dark hair in an asymmetrical cut that tossed the hair on the right side of her head onto her shoulder, while the hair on the left side was trimmed enough to stay out of her face, and she wore a knee-length blue silk dress with a Mandarin collar and dusted with white stars.

On the final right corner was Bridget Jaheem, her smile as blazing as it'd been when she was a child. She'd rarely worn makeup as a kid, but as she'd grown older, she'd really embraced smoky eye shadow. Her long cornrows had been styled into a high ponytail at the top of her head and the ends were trimmed with silver beads. Her collared teal and black dress robes flared open at the waist to show off her dark skinny jeans tucked into a pair of knee-high leather boots.

When Ron approached the table, all seven people looked up at him, their faces breaking into smiles.

"Ron!" said Kevin.

He immediately got to his feet and the two men exchanged a large hug.

"Hey, Kevin," greeted Ron. "How are things?"

Kevin shrugged cheerfully. "Pretty good! Jake was promoted last month, I've just finished hammering out the design for Mattie and Camie's birthday cake...and of course, Oliver'll be starting at Hogwarts next year – same as your Hugo, right?"

“Right,” said Ron with a smile, as he and Bridget exchanged their usual static masculine handshake.

“Is Dennis still dating that girl...Jenny?” chirped Rose.

“Sadly, no,” said Kevin good-naturedly, “but he’s good with it – they weren’t the right match. Fortunately he’s been able to travel more for work, and from the sound of things, the new Seeker on the Irish team is quite pretty.”

He smiled wryly and the others shook their heads in amusement.

“Well, I suppose the saying goes that there are many fish in the sea,” Daphne said airily.

Astoria nodded, her light blue eyes a little softer than her sister’s. “And really, if it makes him happy, who are we to tell him otherwise? Uncle Hyperion never much cared for being tied down either.”

“Speaking of being tied down, how’s *Draco-kins*?” teased Ron as he settled himself in the open seat between Bridget and Cho. “Did the great Master of the Elder Wand try to bully his way in again?”

“He only asked to come that *one* time, Ron,” Astoria reproached him coolly, “and I explained to him that it’s just for us. Could you imagine how big of a table we’d need, if we brought our families along too?”

“We’d need an entire extra table just for your family, Kevin,” giggled Rose.

The others laughed too. One of the servers passed through, tipping off the glasses of water in front of them.

“Can I get you two anything as well, ma’am – sir?” he asked, glancing from Daphne to Ron, who had clearly arrived last.

“I’ll have the lamb and a glass of your finest elf-made Chardonnay,” Daphne murmured.

“Beef Wellington and a glass of Dragonshart stout for me, please,” added Ron.

The server nodded, before sweeping away toward the kitchen.

“Any thoughts on where Oliver might be Sorted?” asked Cho curiously.

“Hufflepuff, I hope,” said Kevin, “but Jake thinks he could be a Slytherin.”

“We’d be happy to have him amongst our ranks, Kevin,” said Bridget with a large grin.

“Hey, throw Hufflepuff a bone,” said Ron good-naturedly. “You guys already got Scorpius last year – not to mention Albus.”

“My nephew ending up in Slytherin was not a surprise,” said Daphne coolly. “I daresay my sons would have been too, if they’d not gone to Durmstrang. Potter’s son, on the other hand? *That* was a surprise.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’ve already declared Willow, Scooter, and Bootsy honorary Hufflepuffs!” Rose said cheerfully, crossing her arms in a playful attempt at decisiveness.

Hannah laughed. “Has Noel signed off on that too?”

“No, but Noel is their parent too, I’m sure they’ll love them just as much regardless,” said Rose coolly.

“Remind me to buy them some cat-sized Hufflepuff scarves next Christmas,” said Cho with a laugh.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me!” said Ron brightly. “Ginny told us about the game against Egypt when she went to report on it for the *Prophet* – pass our congratulations onto Noel for beating that record!”

“Thanks!” said Rose. “Narcissa congratulated Noel too in a letter. I don’t think we’ll see her and Lucius again before our usual Christmas Mass with Beau and Trudy, so it was really nice to hear from them...”

The server returned with Daphne’s and Ron’s drinks and placed them at each of their places.

“Thanks,” said Ron.

He brought a hand down, bending his fingers a few different ways, before he managed to arrange them in a position that would allow him to securely lift the glass. Even after all this time, he still had some trouble separating his fingers, just like he did when he first said goodbye to Jengu back at St. Mungo’s twenty-one years ago. He hadn’t seen Jengu since then, though from what he’d heard, he’d built a new life for himself in Normandy and been rather quiet.

“By the way,” said Hannah, her lips curling up in something of a mischievous smile as she turned to Bridget, “Dad mentioned something about one of his favorite clients raving about this *gorgeous* woman she met at her new favorite restaurant – a charming little Muggle café called *Lottie’s*.”

Everyone all turned to look at Bridget, visibly interested. Bridget cocked her eyebrows, looking almost nonchalant.

“Could’ve been any woman, I’m quite sure,” she said.

Hannah’s smile widened. “Mm, perhaps. Though I think a woman with ‘*eyes as black as night*’ and ‘*a smile that could rival stars*’ might narrow things down slightly.”

“Sounds a touch familiar to me,” Daphne commented, raising an eyebrow at Bridget.

“Who’s this client of your dad’s, Hannah?” Rose asked curiously.

Hannah feigned a shrug, but her face was still consumed by a very large, happy smile. “Oh, just a small-name songwriter – might’ve worked in fashion for a while, or collaborated with the Weird Sisters once or twice...”

“The Weird Sisters?” repeated Kevin, his long-lashed eyes narrowing. “Wait a minute, are you talking about Kali Kye? The spokeswitch for Gladrag’s Wizardwear?”

“Keep your voice down,” said Bridget dully.

“You’re kidding!” said Ron incredulously, goggling at Bridget in delight. “Why didn’t you tell me you two were seeing each other? Did Tremlett get you guys in touch or what?”

“I didn’t say anything because Kali is famous and I have no interest in being so, thank you,” said Bridget very coolly, though she couldn’t completely bite back a smile. “But yes, Donaghan and she met at Lottie’s, and I wrote my address on Kali’s receipt so she could owl me. I hadn’t recognized her at the time and I pretended I still didn’t know who she was until the third date when we almost got caught by the paparazzi. It was just lucky that your brothers were advertising their new line of Imposter Potions at their joke shop, Ron, we were able to hide out in a crowd of customers and everyone simply thought Kali had tried out one of the free samples.”

Kevin and Astoria both stifled their laughter behind their hands as Bridget’s mouth spread into a larger grin.

“You should bring her into the Leaky Cauldron next time,” Hannah said earnestly. “Neville and I would be really happy to see you.”

“*Oh* no,” said Ron daringly, “if Bridget’s bringing Kali anywhere, she’s bringing her to the King’s Café – we *are* business associates. Right, Bridget?”

Bridget grinned broadly at both of them only to very pointedly ignore Ron’s question and turn to Cho in an over-the-top attempt at casualness.

“So, Cho, how are things with you?”

Cho laughed fully as Ron frowned disapprovingly at Bridget.

“Well, Owen and his mother’s statues should be arriving at the Ministry of Magic next month,” she said, “and thanks to the money the Bulstrodes and I fundraised, I was able to hire the crew needed to carve and enchant the statues I designed for the Hogwarts memorial. If all goes as planned, it should be up within the next few years.”

Kevin's eyes lit up. "That's great!"

"Yeah," breathed Cho, her face softening. "I'm hoping to have one for every student who died before graduation, with Cedric standing right in front. If I can manage it, each statue will have enchanted text that will appear when someone walks up to it, explaining who they were. Like Dobby's statue will explain that he was a free elf who chose to work at Hogwarts for pay. Colin's will mention the posthumous journalism award Goodfellow gave him, and Millicent's will be about the elf right's bill Hermione named after her. Arjuna's will quote the Abraxan pamphlets, and Owen's will talk about the Ministry's archives being named after him and his mother. Even the ones without press will say something about them - like Eloise Midgen, she was set to become a magical travel agent. And Takashi Noda, his dream was to work at a dragon preserve. Sophie Roper, Lisa Turpin, and Oliver Rivers became best friends as soon as they collided in Diagon Alley - from that day on, they were almost never seen apart."

"I remember," Hannah said with a smile. "Even when they came to our Cooking Club meetings, they always arrived together."

"They were kind of like you, Potter, and Granger, Ron," said Bridget amusedly. "Tight as tight can be."

The recollections of those lost at the Battle of Hogwarts should've been sad, but the passage of time made the somber reminders coax some soft twinges of nostalgia out as well. It was like their lost friends had become misty watercolor paintings, slightly blurred around the edges and yet forever soft and never in pain.

At that moment, the server arrived with two others, all of whom carried dishes in both hands. Within a few minutes, everyone had received their meal but Daphne.

"Your lamb should be out in just a moment, ma'am," he said with a small smile.

"Thank you," said Daphne politely.

Once he'd left, everyone turned back to Cho, who had started talking again excitedly.

"Anyway, Lalo had the idea, after we've finished with the memorials, to make a documentary! Amanda gave Lalo some film equipment last Christmas, and he thinks it'd be a great opportunity to

record a lot of the stories that Eleanor Bradstone and Arjuna's mother collected while they were writing their books and compile them together..."

Astoria's light blue eyes sparkled with interest. "Do you think Lalo's equipment would work all right in magic-heavy areas?"

"Well, it might be too challenging to record at Hogwarts, without some real work," Cho admitted, "but I'm pretty sure that a standard magical household wouldn't hurt them – I think. I think the trickier thing will be getting enough time off to come back to Britain for enough time to record everything we'll need, but I'm sure I can have a word with Mia about it..."

"How's Mia doing, by the way?" asked Bridget. "I reckon she's not too pleased with her Muggle counterpart."

"Mia doesn't refer to the other President by name," Cho said lightly, "but she was happy to get the job, since it'll be easier for her and Tokala to fight against the magical pride groups back home, now that she's in charge. And at least she can *try* to contain the damage the other President causes – and laugh at his expense, whenever possible." she added with a wry smile.

All of a sudden, their conversation was halted by a loud outburst from the kitchen.

"– the pan, you fucking *donkey*!"

All eight diners turned to grin at each other.

"Ramsay," they all said in unison.

Ron beckoned their server over with two fingers instead of one, since he couldn't properly separate the digits.

"I know he sounds a bit busy right now," he muttered in the server's ear, "but when you get the chance, could you send the head chef out to our table, please? Our lamb entrée is running behind."

The server looked a little nervous in response to the request, but gave Ron a weak nod and quickly

darted away. Bridget and Ron exchanged a grin.

Not a minute later, the two kitchen doors were flung open, and an irritable-looking man with blond hair and a square face and dressed in a perfectly white chef's uniform barreled out, his sharp blue eyes flashing.

Gordon Ramsay turned on his heel, his face hard as he faced the table that had summoned him. His eyes widened upon the people sitting there.

"Hi, Professor," said Bridget with a wide, bright smile.

All at once, the hardness of his expression seemed to disappear, fading into a genuine smile. He strode forward, shaking Kevin's hand, bringing an arm around Astoria and Rose, and kissing Cho and Daphne's cheeks French-style in turn.

"Good to see you," he murmured politely as he did so. "Lovely to see you."

He then looked from Hannah to Bridget.

"The usual get-together, then?"

Hannah nodded. "Some of us missed out the last two years, so we figured we'd have to celebrate specially since we were all able to make it this year!"

"Well, it's good to have you all here, for sure," said Ramsay with a smile. He glanced at Ron and Bridget. "How's business?"

"Great," said Bridget.

"The King's Café has a new special, if you want to swing by and try it," said Ron. "It's a thin crust pizza topped with eggplant and prosciutto. I call it *la Pizza Ronaldo*."

Ramsay's face spread into a disbelieving smile. "That pizza almost lost you the MagicChef

contest. I might be more tempted to call it *la Pizza Wrong-naldo*.”

Bridget, Hannah, Rose, and Astoria all burst out laughing. Rather than looking upset, however, Ron grinned through the flush rising in his cheeks.

“I haven’t been down to your shop in a while,” said Ramsay as he glanced at Rose. “Are your pastries still selling well?”

“Yep!” said Rose brightly. “Noel and I are thinking of expanding – now that everything’s been settled in the courts, Dad will be able to visit us, so we figure we can add a full house with a guest room over the shop! Dad *adores* Diagon Alley, so I’m sure he’d love to come stay with us sometimes.”

“Fantastic,” said Ramsay. He turned to Kevin. “And how’s the cake business?”

“Good!” said Kevin cheerfully. “Jake’s been helping me organize our orders during off-hours, since the Auror department’s kept us busy. Of course Mattie and Camie’s cake is first on our list, but after that I have a Snitch-inspired mango cheesecake in the works for the Krum-Montmercy family and a cherry and chocolate phoenix cake that the support staff ordered as a surprise for Minister Shacklebolt. If all goes well, I should be able to pay you back within a few months!”

“Glad to hear it,” said Ramsay proudly. “Well, I should probably get back to the kitchen...if nothing else, I believe you’re still waiting on your lamb.” He nodded politely to Daphne. “Keep in touch.”

“Later, Ramsay!” Ron called after him as he left.

“He really looks just the same as ever,” Cho said amazedly. “Like nothing ever happened.”

“I know,” murmured Astoria, and her light blue eyes drifted over all of her friends as she smiled. “But all of it *did* happen. Who knows how much of it would’ve happened, if Ramsay hadn’t hosted the MagicChef contest?”

“If he hadn’t been at Hogwarts at all?” said Kevin.

Daphne and Hannah nodded.

“Well...it’s a good thing he was there!” Rose said brightly. “I’m glad he was there!”

Astoria’s eyes twinkled slightly as she smiled and nodded in agreement.

Inside the kitchen, there was a loud *CLATTER*.

“Where’s the lamb *sauce*?” Ramsay’s voice bellowed over the din. There was a shuffling, and he repeated the question again more fiercely, “***Where’s the lamb sauce?!?***”

“Right here, chef – coming right up, chef – !”

With the discovery of the lamb sauce, the peaceful silence of the restaurant once again resumed, and the eight witches and wizards once considered “student chefs” shared large, fond smiles amongst themselves.

Who knew where any of them would be now, if it hadn’t been for Professor Gordon Ramsay. If nothing else, they knew where they were now was better than they could’ve possibly been before.

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